

INFORMATION TO USERS

This reproduction was made from a copy of a document sent to us for microfilming. While the most advanced technology has been used to photograph and reproduce this document, the quality of the reproduction is heavily dependent upon the quality of the material submitted.

The following explanation of techniques is provided to help clarify markings or notations which may appear on this reproduction.

1. The sign or "target" for pages apparently lacking from the document photographed is "Missing Page(s)". If it was possible to obtain the missing page(s) or section, they are spliced into the film along with adjacent pages. This may have necessitated cutting through an image and duplicating adjacent pages to assure complete continuity.
2. When an image on the film is obliterated with a round black mark, it is an indication of either blurred copy because of movement during exposure, duplicate copy, or copyrighted materials that should not have been filmed. For blurred pages, a good image of the page can be found in the adjacent frame. If copyrighted materials were deleted, a target note will appear listing the pages in the adjacent frame.
3. When a map, drawing or chart, etc., is part of the material being photographed, a definite method of "sectioning" the material has been followed. It is customary to begin filming at the upper left hand corner of a large sheet and to continue from left to right in equal sections with small overlaps. If necessary, sectioning is continued again—beginning below the first row and continuing on until complete.
4. For illustrations that cannot be satisfactorily reproduced by xerographic means, photographic prints can be purchased at additional cost and inserted into your xerographic copy. These prints are available upon request from the Dissertations Customer Services Department.
5. Some pages in any document may have indistinct print. In all cases the best available copy has been filmed.

**University
Microfilms
International**

300 N. Zeeb Road
Ann Arbor, MI 48106

8228841

EDWARDS, SUZANNE OZMENT

EXTERNAL NATURE IN THE POETRY OF ROBERT BROWNING

The University of North Carolina at Greensboro

PH.D.

1982

**University
Microfilms
International** 300 N. Zeeb Road, Ann Arbor, MI 48106

Copyright 1983

by

EDWARDS, SUZANNE OZMENT

All Rights Reserved

External Nature in the Poetry of
Robert Browning


by

Suzanne Ozment Edwards

A Dissertation Submitted to
the Faculty of the Graduate School at
The University of North Carolina at Greensboro
in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Philosophy

Greensboro
1982

Approved by


Dissertation Adviser

EDWARDS, SUZANNE OZMENT. *External Nature in the Poetry of Robert Browning.* (1982) Directed by: Professor H. T. Kirby-Smith. Pp. 158.

Robert Browning is best known as a writer of poems which dramatically reveal human character. Unlike the Romantic poets, Browning seldom writes about nature as an isolated entity, yet significant natural description figures in much of his poetry. Instead of composing poems about nature, Browning typically uses details of external nature to create a setting which establishes mood and reveals character. While natural description is admittedly a subsidiary facet of Browning's art, it is of consequence because it supports his primary purpose--character portrayal.

This study of Browning's use of external nature is organized around the poets, artists, and aesthetic movements that influenced him. Chapter I documents Browning's love of external nature and establishes the perimeters for the analysis of his poetry which follows. Chapter II examines the influence of Gerard de Lairese, an eighteenth-century Dutch painter whose treatise on art Browning read as a child. Chapter III discusses characteristics of the picturesque and the sublime which surface in Browning's landscapes and natural imagery. Chapter IV explores the effect of Romanticism on Browning's treatment of nature. Grotesque natural detail is the subject of Chapter V. Chapter VI compares Browning's poetry to that of selected Victorians to ascertain the extent of contemporary influences. The final chapter, Chapter VII, attempts to account for Browning's eclectic and oblique method.

Approval Page

This dissertation has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of the Graduate School at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

Dissertation Adviser

W. J. Kuhn-Smuth, Jr.

Committee Members

Jaytonne P. Brewer
Kelley Griffith, Jr.
William J. Faus

19 May 1982
Date of Acceptance by Committee

19 May 1982
Date of Final Oral Examination

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I wish to express my appreciation to Dr. Randolph Bulgin for his guidance in my early work with this topic; to Lenoir-Rhyne College and the Lutheran Church in America for financial assistance which facilitated the completion of the project; and to the members of my advisory committee for their valuable suggestions. I am especially grateful to Professor H. T. Kirby-Smith, director of my dissertation, for his thoughtful reading of numerous drafts, his insightful criticism, and his continual support and encouragement.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
APPROVAL PAGE	ii
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	iii
CHAPTER	
I. INTRODUCTION	1
ENDNOTES TO CHAPTER I	13
II. THE INFLUENCE OF GERARD DE LAIRESSE	15
ENDNOTES TO CHAPTER II	31
III. THE INFLUENCE OF THE PICTURESQUE AND THE SUBLIME	34
ENDNOTES TO CHAPTER III	57
IV. THE INFLUENCE OF THE ROMANTIC MOVEMENT	60
ENDNOTES TO CHAPTER IV	87
V. THE INFLUENCE OF THE GROTESQUE	90
ENDNOTES TO CHAPTER V	107
VI. THE INFLUENCE OF BROWNING'S CONTEMPORARIES	109
ENDNOTES TO CHAPTER VI	134
VII. CONCLUSION	136
ENDNOTES TO CHAPTER VII	151
BIBLIOGRAPHY	153

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Robert Browning was once asked, "You have not a great love of Nature, have you?" He responded, "Yes, I have, but I love men and women better."¹ Browning's poetry attests to the truth of his statement. This study will show that although he is remembered, as he would have wished to be, for his brilliant portrayal of character through the dramatic monologue, Browning did compose passages of nature poetry that aided him in this purpose. Study of these passages reveals much about his conception of nature--and of the art by which nature was to be depicted.

Natural detail abounds in Browning's poetry, and it is striking in its variety. Some of his poems are set in grassy meadows; some on snow-topped mountain peaks; some in parched deserts. He is fond of water: glittering waterfalls, quiet brooks, stormy seas, summer rains. But Browning is especially fond of the tiny plants and animals and insects that fill the landscape. He writes of brightly-colored flowers--violets, poppies, cyclamen, daisies, tulips, sunflowers, and fennel--and of wild vegetation--lichen, ferns, and toadstools. He particularly delights in describing the tiny creatures who live among these plants--beetles, crickets, snails, mice, caterpillars, lizards, wasps, spiders, and fireflies.

Still, one cannot claim for Browning the overmastering adulation of nature felt by a Wordsworth or even the intense reponse to the beauties of nature felt by a Keats. In fact, it is typically through the eyes and

ears of an imaginary character that the reader encounters the setting of a Browning poem; we do not find the poet reporting his personal impressions of a scene. Browning also fails to find in nature the spiritual significance that other poets have found. He does not view nature as a teacher as Wordsworth does or recognize in nature the perfect equivalent of human emotions that Tennyson often found. In other words, Browning does not present as close a relationship between man and nature as other poets present. Instead, he carefully selects details of external nature, and, in a few lines or a brief passage, uses these details as background to establish a mood which will help to reveal a character's psychology.

Park Honan explains:

A scene--or situation--may be selected and suggested in the title and verse of a dramatic monologue with the utmost economy and with the smallest amount of emphasis upon scene for its own value: that is, with the maximum emphasis upon its usefulness in helping to establish and to reveal a personality.²

For other poets, nature may be the primary concern; for Browning, nature is almost always secondary.

Browning did, however, have a keen appreciation of nature. His love of the outdoors, as well as his habits of close observation and concise description of scenery are clearly demonstrated in his travel accounts. During the years that Robert and Elizabeth Browning lived in Italy (1846-1861), they often left their residence at Casa Guidi in Florence for excursions to other towns and villages in Italy, France, and Switzerland. Browning took considerable delight in the countryside he passed through and filled his letters to family and friends with abbreviated but cogent comments on the sights he enjoyed. In a July 1849 letter

to his sister Sarianna, he writes of a house which he and Elizabeth have rented at the top of a mountain at Bagni di Lucca: "the scenery is delightful, hills covered with vines, olives, chestnuts, and corn--with the river thro' the valley beneath. . . . all about us are mountain paths amid woods and rocks, and complete loneliness."³

After Elizabeth's death in 1861, he returned to England to live, but often during the remaining twenty-eight years of his life, Browning, with his sister Sarianna, revisited Europe. The letters from these holiday trips include numerous accounts of outdoor activities: treks along woodland paths and hikes to nearby mountain peaks. Again and again, Browning discloses his preference for rustic, uninhabited places. In a letter of August 1868 to Isabella Blagden, Browning lists the names of the remote villages he and Sarianna have visited--Rennes, Vannes, Auray, Brest, Morlaix, St. Pol de Leon, Roscoff, Quimper--before they finally arrive in Audierne, "a delightful quite unspoiled little fishing town, with the open ocean in front, and beautiful woods, hills and dales, meadows and lanes behind and around. . . ." where the two of them swim "in a smooth creek of mill pond quietude. . . ." ⁴

Browning acquired his affection for the out-of-doors as a child. From boyhood on, he expressed a great fondness for plants, birds, animals, and insects, a fondness he inherited from his mother. As a young man, he kept a pet spider and in old age enjoyed the companionship of an owl and a pair of geese. His poems are crowded with eagles, sheep, horses, bees, worms, spiders, and beetles. As Emma Marean points out in "The Nature Element in Browning's Poetry," "Nothing [in nature] is unworthy Browning's observation."⁵

Browning comments on his love of plants, especially flowers, in this passage from a letter of July 1838 to Fanny Haworth:

Do look at a Fuchsia in full bloom and notice the clear little honey-drop depending from every flower. .I have but just found it out, to my no small satisfaction,--a bee's breakfast. I only answer for the long blossomed sort, though,--indeed, for this plant in my room. . . . I have, you are to know, such a love for flowers and leaves,--some leaves--that I every now and then,--in an impatience at being unable to possess myself of them thoroughly, to see them quite, satiate myself with their scent,--bite them to bits. .so there will be some sense in that. How I do remember the flowers--even grapes--of places I have seen!--some one flower or weed, I should say, that gets some strangehow connected with them. Snowdrops and Tilsit in Prussia go together; cowslips and Windsor-park, for instance: flowering palm and some place or other in Holland.⁶

Further evidence of Browning's habitual attention to natural detail is offered by Frances Power Cobbe, a friend of the Brownings when they lived in Florence, who remembered that "'when we drove out in parties he would discuss every tree and weed and get excited about the difference between eglantine and eglatere (if there be any), and between either of them and honeysuckle.'"⁷

Browning's use of natural detail in his poetry can be accounted for not only by his early fondness for nature but also by the cultural influences to which he was exposed in the course of his life. He was largely educated at home by his parents and by the volumes in his father's library. As indicated earlier, Browning's love of nature itself can be primarily attributed to his mother's influence. From his father, the poet inherited a love of art, and the discipline of art trained him in the observation of nature. Browning's father was something of an artist himself with a penchant for grotesque caricatures, and, for a time, he fostered the hope that his son might become an artist.⁸ Robert did draw

when he was young, eagerly read the art treatises he found on his father's bookshelves, and frequently visited the Dulwich Gallery which was within walking distance of his home. Later he regularly browsed through the art stalls in Florence and even dabbled in sculpturing with the assistance of his close friend, W. W. Story, the renowned American sculptor. But painting and sculpting remained for Browning merely pleasant pastimes.

It is Browning's poetry, of course, that offers the most striking evidence of his interest in art. One need hardly mention that some of his most famous poems--"Fra Lippo Lippi," "Andrea del Sarto," "Pictor Ignotus," "Old Pictures in Florence"--focus on art, and that they center on Renaissance painters whose works he saw in Italy or whose rather sensational biographies he had read in Vasari's Lives of the Painters, one of his father's many volumes on art. Browning's regard for Renaissance art undoubtedly influenced his celebration of humanity and also the sensual richness of texture and color in his natural descriptions. It is appropriately Fra Lippo Lippi through whom Browning pronounces his own views about artistic truth, about the artist's responsibility to depict

--The beauty and the wonder and the power,
The shapes of things, their colours, lights and shades,⁹
(ll. 283-284)

For Lippi was noted not only for painting believable human characteristics into the faces of his subjects, but he was also one of the earliest to paint believable natural backgrounds in his pictures. Just as the viewer feels that he is looking at actual people and places when he sees a painting by Lippi, the reader feels that he is meeting real, living people set in real, living natural surroundings when he reads a poem by Browning.

Poems other than the painter poems, including "Love Among the Ruins," "Caliban Upon Setebos," "Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came," and "Home Thoughts from Abroad," suggest the effect of Browning's early exposure to art galleries and art books. His preoccupation with art often manifests itself in poems about particular men and women, but that same preoccupation must surely have also contributed to the development of his habit of close observation, and, in turn, to the vivid natural detail in his work.

Browning's travels provided another important influence. Wherever he went, his close examination of scenery provided the details needed for the setting of a poem. For instance, he and Elizabeth occasionally picnicked with friends in the Roman Campagna--a spot which became the site of the lovers' meetings in both "Two in the Campagna" and "Love Among the Ruins." The features of the seascape setting of "James Lee's Wife" were suggested by those Browning saw in 1862 from the window of his lodging at Ste. Marie on the coast of France.¹⁰ And memories of his trip to Russia in 1834 contributed details to the landscape described in "Ivan Ivanovitch," published in Dramatic Idyls in 1879.¹¹

For the most part, the landscapes in Browning's poems are Italian rather than English. Though his descriptions of the English countryside are lovingly rendered in poems such as "De Gustibus--" and "Home Thoughts From Abroad," they are rare. Browning made his first trip to Italy in the spring of 1838, returned in 1844 for another visit, and took his bride Elizabeth Barrett there to live when they married in 1846. He did not return to England to live until Elizabeth's death in 1861. Since Browning spent much of his adult life in Italy (and, in fact, died there at his son's home in Venice in 1889), the predominance of Italian scenery

is not surprising. Moreover, Men and Women (1855), his most highly-acclaimed collection and the one containing the poems with his most vivid landscapes and natural imagery, was written during what critics agree was his most productive period, the years when he and Elizabeth were living in Florence.

Natural detail figures significantly in his poems; however, in the volumes written about landscape in literature, scholars usually either ignore Browning or make only passing references to his work. This is not unexpected because, as I have already said, Browning is not a "nature poet"; he is a narrative poet, a dramatic poet. William Raymond explains Browning's treatment of nature thus:

Though there is much fine landscape painting in his poems, this is the background rather than the foreground of his canvas. Nature is subordinated to man. His portrayal of her is selective, designed to illustrate and enhance, either by likeness or contrast, those human moods or states which are the dominating motifs of his poetry.¹²

Browning's avowed poetic purpose is to emphasize a character's psychology and thereby reveal his soul. And yet Browning consciously uses landscape, scenic detail, and natural metaphors to help him achieve this purpose. In February of 1853, while working on Men and Women, Browning wrote to the French critic Joseph Milsand saying that he was composing "lyrics with more music and painting than before, so as to get people to hear and see."¹³ The result was poems such as "Love Among the Ruins," "By the Fire-Side," "Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came," and "Saul": poems with powerful visual and auditory imagery.

In some ways, Browning's work departs from the realm of traditional poetry and moves toward that of fiction. Ian Jack has, in fact, pointed

out the "affinity of many of Browning's finest poems to the art of the short story."¹⁴ This trait is important in understanding Browning's treatment of nature since he employs natural description very much as some fiction writers would--to establish a setting that evokes a strong mood. Browning wants to immerse the reader in the character's world. Nature, in his poetry, then, reinforces character portrayal.

The only extended discussion of nature in Browning's poetry is found in chapters two and three of Stopford Brooke's 1902 study, The Poetry of Robert Browning. This early analysis, valuable as it sometimes is, needs to be expanded. Brooke does not much concern himself with the influences which shaped Browning's treatment of nature. The two chapters offer subjective, largely unsubstantiated judgments about the quality of passages selected from Browning. An earlier essay, a Browning Society product, is Emma Marean's "The Nature Element in Browning's Poetry," 1892, which is even more subjective and less helpful than Brooke's. Joseph Warren Beach in The Concept of Nature in Nineteenth Century English Poetry, 1936, devotes a short chapter to Browning, but he covers only a few of Browning's poems. W. C. DeVane has contributed to an understanding of nature in Browning's poetry in his 1927 book Browning's Parleyings: The Autobiography of a Mind. The chapter on the influence of Gerard de Lairese's artistic treatise on Browning's work is most pertinent. More recently, in 1979, an important book entitled Nature and the Victorian Imagination was published. It includes a chapter by Lawrence Poston entitled "Browning and the Altered Romantic Landscape." In this chapter, Poston uses "By the Fire-Side" and "Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came" to argue cogently that unlike the Romantics who celebrate nature as a

fundamental source of truth, Browning emphasizes the response of the individual to nature.

Because Browning's treatment of nature has not in the past received adequate critical attention, I chose to make it the subject of my dissertation. The sources mentioned in the preceding paragraph have all, to varying degrees, proven helpful. Other works on Browning which have been especially useful are DeVane's indispensable A Browning Handbook (1955); William Irvine and Park Honan's recent biography, The Book, the Ring, and the Poet (1974); and Ian Jack's sound critical assessment, Browning's Major Poetry (1973). Margaret Drabble's A Writer's Britain: Landscape in Literature, 1979, was helpful in that it emphasizes landscape as seen from the writer's perspective. Three other books were valuable for the background that they provide on the history of painting: Kenneth Clark's Landscape Into Art (1949); Laurence Binyon's Landscape in Art and Poetry (1929); and T. S. R. Boase's English Art: 1800-1870, volume ten of The Oxford History of English Art (1959).

This dissertation will cover those poems by Robert Browning which contain significant landscapes, scenic details, or natural images and metaphors. Marjorie Nicolson, author of Mountain Gloom and Mountain Glory, opens her book with the reminder, "Like men of every age, we see in Nature what we have been taught to look for, we feel what we have been prepared to feel."¹⁵ The present study applies this premise to the treatment of nature in the poetry of Robert Browning. The chapters that follow will examine the variety of known influences which taught Browning what to look for in nature and prepared him for what to feel.

A wide range of influences, both artistic and literary, will be discussed. From his early readings of The Art of Painting in All Its Branches, a treatise by the Dutch artist Gerard de Lairese, Browning became familiar with neoclassical formulas for beautiful and ugly landscapes. Lairese's influence is the subject of the next chapter. The third chapter will explore Browning's use of characteristics of the pre-Romantic artistic categories, the picturesque and the sublime. Chapter four will deal with Browning's response to Romantic nature theory; as a young man, Browning read the Romantic poets and was strongly affected by Shelley in particular. Chapter five will show that Browning shared his father's delight in grotesque detail and style. Browning's contemporaries, the focus in chapter six, are yet another possible influence. Like Tennyson, though not as pervasively, he sometimes created a landscape which would evoke a mood appropriate for the subject of a given poem. With the Pre-Raphaelite painters, he shared a love of natural detail and intense, brilliant color, and a narrative bent.

The neoclassical, the grotesque, the picturesque and sublime, the Romantic, the Pre-Raphaelite--all, to a greater or lesser degree influenced Browning's handling of nature, or at least reflected ideas about art and nature that Browning himself entertained at one time or another. Despite the fact that these influences can be traced through Browning's poetry, it is, nevertheless, difficult to ascertain exactly what his attitude was toward nature in art. For one thing, Browning seldom expressed his attitudes about the treatment of nature in painting or literature. Comments in his correspondence are scattered and sketchy. It is just as hard to pin Browning down in these matters as

it is in any other question of art or literature, of politics, philosophy, or morals. His most specific statements about nature in literature occur in a late poem, "The Parleying With Gerard de Laïresse." In this poem he repeats the views which he voiced indirectly through Fra Lippo Lippi--namely his insistence on realism, in natural description as well as in character revelation.

Another difficulty is Browning's emphasis on drama and character portrayal. He wrote almost no lyric poems--the genre often associated with natural description or at least expressive of a response to nature. Ian Jack, for example, states that "The purely lyrical impulse . . . was not strong . . ." in Browning.¹⁶ Jack probably had in mind something like the distinction William Cadbury makes between the lyric and what he terms the "anti-lyric" in poetry. In lyric poetry, according to Cadbury, the poet conveys his message by speaking in his own voice whereas in anti-lyric poetry, the poet relays his message through the voice of a character he has created.¹⁷ By this definition, the dramatic monologue form, which Browning used, is anti-lyric. Elsewhere Browning's self-effacing tendency has been termed "oblique." E. D. H. Johnson maintains that "By dramatizing individual case histories, he stepped before his readers in such a variety of poetic guises that it was impossible to identify him with any single role."¹⁸ This tendency further complicates any attempt to ascribe to Browning specific theories of nature. For the natural description in a Browning poem is closely tied to the speaker of the poem; it is a part of him, a reflection of his personality and his perception of the world about him. Or, as Park Honan has expressed it,

each imaginary Browning monologist is himself a little Shakespeare, reflecting and forming images as he goes along in order to make his thought clear and to create special effects, but unwittingly revealing himself in the process, and the images are always those that seem to have been fashioned within his own being and yet supplied by the raw materials of his everyday life--by objects that he sees and touches or uses, or by the books that he reads, or by those aspects of nature that he specially perceives as vivid and striking.¹⁹

And Lawrence Poston echoes this assessment, saying, "in many if not most instances in Browning's poetry we are viewing a particular landscape, or human relationship, through the consciousness of a dramatic character."²⁰

A third difficulty in determining Browning's attitude toward nature in art is that, in Browning's work, there is no tidy progression, no clearly discernible pattern of development. In other words, Browning did not experiment with neoclassical motifs, tire of those and discard them in favor of Romantic nature theories. It seems that Browning never did exactly the same thing twice. Instead, he perpetually experimented. He continually tested methods and theories--adapting, modifying, discarding. Borrowing just what suited him and continually mingling techniques, Browning acquired a distinctive personal style. Motivated by his own notion of progress, he constantly seemed to be trying to break free from convention, from fashion. Browning, then, clearly worked from established traditions but always moved on to something else.

Each of the following chapters will examine one of the influences which helps to explain Browning's treatment of nature. Each chapter will include first an in-depth discussion of a given influence and then a close analysis of poems which show signs of that influence. In the final chapter, chapter seven, I will offer a tentative explanation for Browning's eclectic method.

ENDNOTES TO CHAPTER I

¹W. Hall Griffin and Harry C. Minchin, The Life of Robert Browning with Notices of his Writings, his Family, and his Friends (1910; rev. 1938; rpt. Hamden: Archon Books, 1966), p. 39.

²Park Honan, Browning's Characters: A Study in Poetic Technique (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1961), p. 126.

³Thurman L. Hood, ed., Letters of Robert Browning Collected by Thomas J. Wise (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1933), pp. 23, 25.

⁴Hood, p. 126.

⁵Emma E. Marean, "The Nature Element in Browning's Poetry" in Boston Browning Society Papers, Selected to Represent the Work of the Society from 1886 to 1897 (New York: Macmillan Company, 1897), p. 482.

⁶Hood, p. 1.

⁷Griffin and Minchin, p. 40.

⁸Actually Robert Browning's father's wish for an artist in the family did come true, for the poet's son, Robert Wiedemann Barrett Browning, did, at the suggestion of the Pre-Raphaelite painter John Everett Millais, become an artist--a rather successful one during his lifetime.

⁹Kenyon, F. G., ed. The Works of Robert Browning (London: Smith, Elder and Company, 1912), IV, 112. All further references to this work appear in the text. Throughout the dissertation British spellings are reproduced as found in the sources used.

¹⁰William Clyde DeVane, A Browning Handbook (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1935; rev. 1955), p. 285.

¹¹DeVane, p. 438.

¹²William O. Raymond, "'The Jewelled Bow': A Study in Browning's Imagery and Humanism" in Robert Browning: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Philip Drew (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin Company, 1966), p. 116.

¹³Quoted in Ian Jack, Browning's Major Poetry (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973), p. 136.

¹⁴Jack, p. 73.

¹⁵Marjorie Hope Nicolson, Mountain Gloom and Mountain Glory: The Development of the Aesthetics of the Infinite (New York: Cornell University Press, 1959), p. 1.

¹⁶Jack, p. 76.

¹⁷William Cadbury, "Lyric and Anti-Lyric Forms: A Method for Judging Browning," University of Toronto Quarterly, 34 (October 1964), 47.

¹⁸Edward D. H. Johnson, The Alien Vision of Victorian Poetry: Sources of the Poetic Imagination in Tennyson, Browning, and Arnold (Hamden: Archon Books, 1963), pp. 95-96.

¹⁹Honan, p. 169.

²⁰Lawrence Poston, "Browning and the Altered Romantic Landscape," in Nature and the Victorian Imagination, eds. U. C. Knoepfelmacher and G. B. Tennyson (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977), p. 427.

CHAPTER II
THE INFLUENCE OF GERARD DE LAIRESSE

As a child, Browning read widely in his father's extensive library. One book in particular seems to have been influential in shaping his views about landscape and natural detail. That book was The Art of Painting In All Its Branches, written in 1707 by the Dutch painter Gerard de Lairese. In his father's copy Browning wrote in 1874, "I read this book more often and with greater delight, when I was a child, than any other; and still remember the main of it most gratefully for the good I seem to have got by the prints and wondrous text. . . ." ¹ Lairese's five-hundred page text, enhanced by seventy illustrations, offered a compendium of technical advice for painters. Browning apparently focused on book six, the section pertaining to landscape.

In The Art of Painting, Lairese expressed a preference for "woods with vistas, [sic] wherein the eye may lose itself; rocks, rivers, and waterfalls, green fields, &c [sic] delightful to the eye." ² Lairese did not approve, however, of landscape as a subject for art in and of itself. The Renaissance glorification of the human body and emphasis on the moral or historical significance of subject matter still predominated. ³ Kenneth Clark, in Landscape Into Art, asserted that "Before landscape painting could be made an end in itself it had to be fitted into the ideal concept to which every artist and writer on art subscribed for three hundred years after the Renaissance." ⁴ For centuries, artistic theorists held that "Both in content and design landscape must aspire to

those higher kinds of painting which illustrate a theme, religious, historical or poetic."⁵ In other words, to be taken seriously, landscape art had to have a message. The result was the immense popularity of the idealized nature paintings of such seventeenth-century French and Italian painters as Claude Lorraine, Nicholas and Gaspard Poussin, and Salvator Rosa. Inspired by the Italian *campagna*, the Poussins and Lorraine presented classical themes, using characters from ancient myth and history and features of Greek and Roman architecture in their tranquil, ideally regulated landscapes.⁶ Rosa, on the other hand, displayed the turbulent forces of nature sweeping across his landscapes. Although their compositions were highly stylized and artificial, in keeping with neoclassical taste, these artists were among the first to begin to picture nature in more realistic detail.

Lairesse, who considered Nicholas Poussin his master, admired natural scenery adorned with temples and fountains, gods and nymphs and satyrs. He praised

A landscape, adorned with sound and straight grown trees, round bodied and finely leafed, spacious and even grounds, with gentle ups and downs, clear and still rivers, delightful vistas, well arranged colours, and an agreeable blue sky, with some small driving clouds; also elegant fountains, magnificent houses and palaces, disposed according to the rules of architecture, and richly ornamented; likewise, well-shaped people agreeable in their action; and each coloured and draperied according to his quality; together with cows, sheep, and other well-fed cattle. . . .⁷

To Browning, as to these neoclassical artists, the Roman *campagna* is an especially pleasing landscape. Captivated by the beauty of the region, Browning frequently describes it in his poetry, his descriptions echoing Lairesse's qualifications of a landscape "delightful to the eye." For

example, the solemn beauty of the campagna is depicted in the opening lines of "Love Among the Ruins." In the midst of the grassy plains, the ruins of an ancient fortress now stand

Where the quiet-coloured end of evening smiles
 Miles and miles
 On the solitary pastures where our sheep
 Half-asleep
 Tinkle homeward thro' the twilight, stray or stop
 As they crop-- (ll. 1-6)

The speaker in "A Lover's Quarrel" looks out on the campagna in springtime with its

Miles and miles of gold and green
 Where the sunflowers blow
 In a solid glow, (ll. 37-39)

And the lovers in "Two in the Campagna" find themselves dwarfed by the expansiveness of "The champaign with its endless fleece/ Of feathery grasses everywhere!" (ll. 21-22) Browning's poetic pictures of this one spot indicate that Lairese's love of the pastoral scene did affect him.

As an artist with decidedly classical tastes, Lairese advocated narrative treatment of classical subject matter. He favored "antique" rather than "modern" (i.e. realistic) landscapes in art. To achieve an "antique" landscape, it was necessary for the artist to model his work after a master like Lorraine or Poussin and add to his canvas characters positioned near classical buildings reenacting scenes from classical myth.

Yet, as Browning's biographers, Irvine and Honan, observed, despite a fondness for classical trappings, "What Lairese aimed at, the tombs and temples once cleared away, was the picturesque of nature. . . ."8

For example, like the picturesque artists who enjoyed such popularity later in the eighteenth century, Lairesse commended rural scenery and variation in painted landscapes. He specified:

variety consists not only in the difference or irregularity of the objects, as trees, hills, fountains, and the like, but in the diversity of each of them; for instance, bending and strait trees, large and small hills . . . green and russet lands. . . .⁹

In essence, Lairesse did believe in accurately imitating nature to produce an appropriate background for the narrative theme, but only nature at its best. He did not judge just any natural scenery acceptable. Again, he demonstrated his neoclassical bent in his insistence that the artist "be an imitator of well-formed nature, and elegantly paint her most perfect parts,"¹⁰ advice which coincides with Alexander Pope's preference for "Nature to advantage dressed." The artist, Lairesse insisted, must select the most pleasing aspects of nature: stately trees; clear, still ponds; gently swelling grounds.

Though his tastes were strongly classical, though he despised the realistic trends he saw in modern art, Lairesse did influence Browning--a poet who described nature in exacting, life-like word pictures--with his theories of landscape, probably because as DeVane has pointed out "Landscape was, in Lairesse, the least fanciful of his creations."¹¹ His pictures might center on a scene from Ovid, but the background of the picture was quite true to nature.

For Browning also nature largely supplies background. Like Lairesse's paintings, Browning's poems certainly depend on narrative, but the mythology has been replaced by more plausible fiction--tales of defiant rebels ("The Italian in England"), discontented lovers ("The Last Ride

Together"), and frustrated artists ("Andrea del Sarto").

Browning was influenced not only by what Lairese deemed beautiful in nature, but even more strikingly by what the Dutch painter had considered ugly. Lairese provided the following detailed account of the abhorrent in landscape:

a piece with deformed trees, widely branched and leaved, and disorderly spreading from east towards west, crooked bodied, old and rent, full of knots and hollowness; also rugged grounds without roads or ways, sharp hills, and monstrous mountains filling the offscape, rough or ruined buildings with their parts lying up and down in confusion; likewise muddy brooks, a gloomy sky abounding with heavy clouds; the field furnished with lean cattle and vagabonds of [sic] gypsies: such a piece, I say, is not to be called a fine landscape.¹²

Though this is an especially bleak picture, Lairese's description did draw on a combination of details, both picturesque (knotted, gnarled trees; architectural ruins; and gypsies) and sublime (towering mountains and stormy skies), which later became a part of Romantic art. Whereas some of the traits Lairese most admired in a landscape were also consistent with the picturesque in art, they were more specifically traits of a pastoral picturesqueness, one marked by the serenity and charm of a well-ordered rural scene. Lairese did not approve of the rugged rusticity which came to seem so agreeable in the sentimental second half of the eighteenth century. He considered pronounced irregularities deformities of nature. To clarify his views, in chapter seventeen of The Art of Painting, Lairese took his readers on an imaginary walk, calling attention to ugly or "unpainterlike" scenery along the way. DeVane suggests that after repeated readings of Lairese, Browning had internalized these prose pictures and drew on the details when he created his own poetic landscapes.¹³

For, while Lairese thought the artist should scorn the ugly in nature, Browning considered the ugly appropriate for depicting certain situations.

One such ugly landscape appears in "An Epistle Containing the Strange Medical Experience of Karshish, the Arab Physician." This monologue takes the form of a letter from Karshish, an Arab healer, to his master, Abib. In the letter Karshish describes his journey to Jerusalem and his meeting with a Jew named Lazarus who reportedly died but was "restored to life/ By a Nazarene physician of his tribe;" (ll. 99-100). Karshish tries to present an objective report but is clearly intrigued by the possibility that the "Nazarene physician" might be "God himself" (l. 268).

Karshish meets Lazarus as he approaches Jerusalem. The strangeness of the landscape parallels the strangeness of Lazarus's story:

. . . I met him thus:
I crossed a ridge of short sharp broken hills
Like an old lion's cheek teeth. Out there came
A moon made like a face with certain spots
Multiform, manifold and menacing:
Then a wind rose behind me. So we met
In this old sleepy town at unaware,
The man and I. (ll. 290-297)

The desolate terrain, the "menacing" moon, the ghostly wind--features Lairese would have considered repulsive--provide an appropriately eerie setting for Karshish's encounter with a man who has been dead but lives again.

In "Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came" Browning describes another bleak, barren, harsh country like the ones he had read about in Lairese's book.¹⁴ This is especially significant because landscape is of central importance in "Childe Roland." While in most of Browning's poetry, natural description is limited to brief passages and is "subservient

to narrative and character," in this poem "the landscape is everything. . . ."15

In Browning's poem *Childe Roland* is on a quest to the Dark Tower; the purpose of his journey is never identified. Many of the features of the nightmare world through which *Childe Roland* passes are similar to those described by *Lairesse*. For instance, *Lairesse* claimed that an ugly landscape was characterized by "rugged grounds without roads or ways." In this poem, as soon as *Childe Roland* turns into the path shown to him by the "hoary cripple, with malicious eye" (l. 2), the road vanishes, leaving only "grey plain all round" (l. 52). The sparse vegetation is stunted and shriveled:

If there pushed any ragged thistle-stalk
 Above its mates, the head was chopped; the bents
 Were jealous else. What made those holes and rents
 In the dock's harsh swarth leaves, bruised as to baulk
 All hope of greenness? (ll. 67-71)

As for the grass, it grew as scant as hair
 In leprosy; thin dry blades pricked the mud
 Which underneath looked kneaded up with blood. (ll. 73-75)

Lairesse was also repelled by "lean cattle." In Browning's poem, *Roland* comes upon "One blind stiff horse, his every bone a-stare" (l. 76).

Consistent with *Lairesse's* censure of "muddy brooks," Browning describes a stagnant river, "its black eddy bespate with flakes and spumes" (l. 114), winding sluggishly through the landscape. The river fouls everything along its banks just as the landscape as a whole begins to foul *Roland's* mind. As he wades through the black water, he imagines that just below the surface lie the wretched bodies of drowned victims:

Which, while I forded,--good saints, how I feared
 To set my foot upon a dead man's cheek,
 Each step, or feel the spear I thrust to seek
 For hollows, tangled in his hair or beard!
 --It may have been a water-rat I speared,
 But, ugh! it sounded like a baby's shriek. (ll. 121-126)

On the other side of the river, the desolate terrain continues
 uninterrupted:

Then came a bit of stubbed ground, once a wood,
 Next a marsh, it would seem, and now mere earth (ll. 145-146)

Bog, clay and rubble, sand and stark black dearth.

Now blotches rankling, coloured gay and grim,
 Now patches where some leanness of the soil's
 Broke into moss or substances iike boils;
 Then came some palsied oak, a cleft in him
 Like a distorted mouth that splits its rim
 Gaping at death, and dies while it recoils. (ll. 150-156)

This tree bears a marked likeness to those described by Lairesse as
 offensive, being "crooked bodied, old and rent, full of knots and hollow-
 ness. . . ."16

As Roland advances, he gradually perceives a ring of "monstrous
 mountains filling the offscape. . . ."17

. . . the plain had given place
 All round to mountains -- with such name to grace
 Mere ugly heights and heaps. . . . (ll. 164-166)

In their midst looms the Dark Tower with its "round squat turret/
 Built of brown stone. . ." (ll. 182-183). As the sun sets and darkness
 encroaches, a deafening clamor builds, and Roland recognizes "ranged along
 the hill-sides. . . . in a sheet of flame" (ll. 199, 201) the images of

those questers who preceded him. Defiantly, yet futilely, Roland blows his horn.

Critics have disagreed about the theme of the poem, but most concur that Roland's quest is "a mental voyage,"¹⁸ "a journey into the self,"¹⁹ and that what he discovers is meaninglessness. Roma King contends that the poem "depicts the paradox of man's striving without hope, of his need to create meaning when no meaning exists."²⁰ William Cadbury agrees saying, "The pattern of emptiness, felt but not understood, forces him [Roland] in the end to accept lack of meaning and admit defeat in his search for pattern."²¹ The desolate landscape he wanders through, where even plants and animals seem to have given up the struggle to survive, corresponds to the lack of meaning in Roland's quest. At first the young knight does not perceive the futility of his journey. Cadbury notes that Roland boldly pursues his course across the tortured terrain until section twenty-seven when he recognizes that evening is about to fall and he is no closer than at the outset. However, Cadbury continues:

he consistently errs in trying to give it [the landscape] meaning and pattern He expects to be able to orient himself to the road, and so the road disappears . . . he expects that the river will divide the world he knows into recognizable moral opposites, and so he finds that the far side is as terrible as the near.²²

The nightmare quality of the landscape convinces the reader of the agony of Roland's pilgrimage--a mental agony. Just as there is no relief for Roland from mental anguish, there is no relief in nature from the stark desolation of the wasteland. In fact, the landscape becomes more bleak, matching his mounting anxiety, as he nears the Dark Tower.

It is as though the landscape is a physical manifestation of Roland's apprehensions.²³ Using Lairese's criteria for an abhorrent landscape, Browning has created an appropriate setting for his character's quest.

While the scenery in "Childe Roland" is strikingly similar to descriptions found in The Art of Painting, it cannot be attributed solely to Browning's reading of Lairese. Browning himself insisted for years that his only source for the poem was the scene from King Lear in which Edgar appears out on the heath during a violent storm. He finally admitted to Mrs. Orr, however, that the wretched horse described in the poem was suggested by one in a tapestry he owned.²⁴ And in a letter to A. W. Hunt, a minor artist who painted an 1866 watercolor of the "Childe Roland" landscape, he stated, "My own 'marsh' was only made out of my head,--with some recollection of a strange solitary little tower I have come upon more than once in Massa-Carrara, in the midst of low hills. . . ." ²⁵ Despite Browning's disclaimers, Lairese was undoubtedly the primary influence. The accumulation of natural details reminiscent of those in the artist's treatise suggests the strong, even if subconscious, effect of Lairese on Browning's attitudes toward the pleasing and the repellent in nature.

In "Childe Roland," then, Browning, following Lairese's specifications for an ugly landscape, creates one of his own which produces a vivid picture in the reader's imagination and also sets the appropriate mood for the message of the poem. In fact, perhaps the advice given by Lairese which best served Browning as a poet was his urging that natural detail be used to establish a fitting mood. Lairese went so far as to insist that actions depicted be suited to the time of day, saying that

daybreak is the appropriate hour for battle or hunting scenes, that morning is the proper time for religious sacrifice, that rest is appropriate at noon, and that licentious behavior is suited to afternoon hours, et cetera.²⁶ Browning learned this lesson well. While Browning adapted Lairese's advice to fit his own poetic subjects, he often established a time of day which coincides with the monologist's situation. For instance, Roland reaches the end of his journey and despairs of success just as darkness begins to fall. In another poem, "Andrea del Sarto," the painter fittingly contemplates his artistic and personal failures in the gloom of dusk. "Porphyria's Lover" is also illustrative. In this poem the setting is only hinted at and yet is powerfully suggestive. The first four lines compactly render scene and mood:

The rain set early in to-night,
 The sullen wind was soon awake,
 It tore the elm-tops down for spite,
 And did its worst to vex the lake: (ll. 1-4)

And so from the beginning of his macabre poem the reader has a mental picture of a dismal cottage beside a lake. The isolated cottage; the cold, driving rain; the sharp, howling wind--all create suspense and help to prepare the reader for the bizarre murder that is to occur.

In discussing Lairese's impact on Browning's work, DeVane argues that the painter provides a starting point for Browning but that Browning surpasses Lairese in both scenic and narrative presentation because he pushes beyond surface appearances. Browning's scenery, says DeVane, "is richer and more luxuriant" than Lairese's.²⁷ And the fictive quality of his poetry is more probing, more true to life, for, DeVane points out, "in dealing with men and women he [Browning] could not be content

with mere narrative and pictorial representation." He felt compelled "to enter dramatically into the passions of his characters."²⁸

Lairesse's willingness to settle for, even prefer, the shallow and contrived had disappointed Browning even as a young boy when, after reading The Art of Painting, he had viewed several of Lairesse's paintings at the Dulwich Gallery near his home. His disappointment becomes the subject of "The Parleying with Gerard de Lairesse," a poem that he wrote decades later. In September 1885, to be exact, Browning began work on Parleyings with Certain People of Importance in Their Day and published the poem nearly a year and a half later in January of 1887.²⁹ Browning intended to present through dramatic monologues "men whose works had played an important part in his early education."³⁰ The result, according to DeVane, is a kind of "biography of his mental life. . . ."³¹ In the sixth section, "The Parleying with Gerard de Lairesse," Browning makes his clearest statement about his theory of nature in art when he defends modern art against Lairesse's view that classical is the only great art.

The "Parleying" opens with Browning recalling the subjects of Lairesse's work and the painter's dictates on the kind of scenery suitable for artistic treatment:

But--oh, your piece of sober sound advice
 That artists should descry abundant worth
 In trivial commonplace, not groan at dearth
 If fortune bade the painter's craft be plied
 In vulgar town and country! Why despond
 Because hemmed round by Dutch canals? Beyond
 The ugly actual, lo, on every side
 Imagination's limitless domain
 Displayed a wealth of wondrous sounds and sights
 Ripe to be realized by poet's brain
 Acting on painter's brush! (ll. 52-62)

Browning specifically describes himself and his artistic approach:

I who myself contentedly abide
 Awake, nor want the wings of dream,--who tramp
 Earth's common surface, rough, smooth, dry or damp
 --I understand alternatives (ll. 111-114)

Browning disdains fancy, finding beauty in more humble, realistic scenes,
 in the

Apple of English homesteads, where I see
 Nor seek more than crisp buds a struggling bee
 Uncrumples, caught by sweet he clammers through? (ll. 126-128)

Comparing himself and his contemporaries to the bee who is content to
 "sate sense with the simply true" (l. 130), Browning claims that modern
 artists could do as Lairese suggests but that this would be a regression.
 He proudly proclaims:

If we no longer see as you of old,
 'T is we see deeper. Progress for the bold!
 You saw the body, 't is the soul we see. (ll. 171-173)

In The Art of Painting, Lairese took his readers on imaginary walks
 to illustrate his artistic principles about both the beautiful and the
 ugly through his commentary on the scenery. Browning, in turn, proposes
 to take Lairese on a walk. Accordingly, Browning guides Lairese through
 an imaginative landscape pointing out different scenes at different times
 of the day--Artemis in the morning, Alexander the Great going to battle
 at dusk. DeVane notes that in this section of the poem Browning follows
 Lairese's rules by using classical subjects and choosing appropriate
 hours of the day for each scene, but that Browning goes beyond Lairese by
 looking more penetratingly at his subjects.³² For instance, in the

following passage, Browning describes the noon-hour scene which will provide the setting for the story of Lyda and the Satyr:

Noon is the conqueror,--not a spray, nor leaf,
 Nor herb, nor blossom but has rendered up
 Its morning dew: the valley seemed one cup
 Of cloud-smoke, but the vapour's reign was brief,
 Sun-smitten, see, it hangs--the filmy haze--
 Gray-garmenting the herbless mountain-side,
 To soothe the day's sharp glare: while far and wide
 Above unclouded burns the sky, one blaze
 With fierce immitigable blue, no bird
 Ventures to spot by passage. E'en of peaks
 Which still presume there, plain each pale point speaks
 In wan transparency of waste incurred
 By over-daring: far from me be such!
 Deep in the hollow, rather, where combine
 Tree, shrub and briar to roof with shade and cool
 The remnant of some lily-strangled pool,
 Edged round with mossy fringing soft and fine.
 Smooth lie the bottom slabs, and overhead
 Watch elder, bramble, rose, and service-tree
 And one beneficent rich barberry
 Jewelled all over with fruit-pendants red.³³ (ll. 262-282)

Instead of merely accumulating natural details which will contribute to a beautiful, but static, scene as Lairese would have done, Browning enters into the life of the landscape and lures his readers there. The reader can feel the steamy haze of midday, the blazing sun, the cool moistness by the shaded lily pond.

Browning disdains Lairese's advice that artists should

. . . 'Dream afresh old godlike shapes,
 Recapture ancient fable that escapes,
 Push back reality, repeople earth
 With vanished falseness, recognize no worth
 In fact new-born unless 't is rendered back
 Pallid by fancy, as the western rack
 Of fading cloud bequeaths the lake some gleam
 Of its gone glory!' (ll. 382-389)

He continues:

Let things be--not seem,
 I counsel rather,--do, and nowise dream!
 Earth's young significance is all to learn:
 The dead Greek lore lies buried in the urn
 Where who seeks fire finds ashes. (ll. 389-393)

Browning's contention, then, is that art has progressed and that modern art surpasses the accomplishments of classical art because modern artists have developed the capacity for imaginative insight. Not content merely to depict, they enter imaginatively into the lives of their subjects whether the subject be animal, plant, or human. To prove the superiority of the modern artist's insight, Browning closes his "Parleying" with a short lyric about spring, a lyric in which he not only vividly describes spring but recreates the very spirit or soul of the season:

Dance, yellows and whites and reds,--
 Lead your gay orgy, leaves, stalks, heads
 Astir with the wind in the tulip-beds!

There's sunshine; scarcely wind at all
 Disturbs starved grass and daisies small
 On a certain mound by a churchyard wall.

Daisies and grass be my heart's bedfellows
 On the mound wind spares and sunshine mellows;
 Dance you, reds and whites and yellows! (ll. 426-434)

Browning's landscapes demonstrate the influence of Lairesse, but in landscape as well as in narrative, Browning celebrates realism. Spiders, beetles, snails and worms crawl through his landscapes; lichen, ferns, and wild flowers color the terrain; instead of classical deities, peasants, rebels, and gypsies animate his natural settings. Though Browning often sets his poem near an ancient architectural structure, he invariably depicts

it in its present condition; the ruined fortress in "Love Among the Ruins" and the moss-covered tomb in "Two in the Campagna" are exemplary.

It is impossible to credit Gerard de Lairese with inspiring all Browning's mature views about nature in art, but that there was considerable influence is undeniable. Undoubtedly, Lairese helped Browning to develop a painter's eye, a painter's sensitivity to nature. Irvine and Honan maintain that "From Lairese Robert learned to observe details and compose them into landscapes."³⁵ More importantly for his own poetic purposes, "He learned that the physical elements of nature have psychological equivalents for the beholder which become in the representations of the painter--or the poet--a language to express emotions and even ideas."³⁶ As was typical with him, Browning absorbed from his source what he found useful and rejected what he found incompatible with his own views. For this reason, Lairese's influence was liberating, not restrictive.

ENDNOTES TO CHAPTER II

¹Catalogue of Pictures, Drawings and Engravings, Autograph Letters and Manuscripts, Books and Works of Art, The Property of R. W. Barrett Browning, Esq. by London: Sotheby, Wilkinson and Hodge (London: Dryden Press, 1913), p. 107.

²Gerard de Lairese, The Art of Painting in All Its Branches, rev. W. M. Craig (London: Edward Orme, 1817), p. 221.

³Kenneth Clark, Landscape Into Art (New York: Harper and Row, 1976), p. 54.

⁴Clark, p. 109.

⁵Clark, p. 109.

⁶Laurence Binyon, Landscape in English Art and Poetry (1929; rpt. n. p.: Folcroft Press, 1970), p. 65.

⁷Lairese, pp. 285-286.

⁸William Irvine and Park Honan, The Book, the Ring, and the Poet (New York: McGraw Hill, 1974), p. 10.

⁹Lairese, p. 221. See Chapter III for a discussion of the picturesque in Browning's poetry.

¹⁰Lairese, p. 242.

¹¹William Clyde DeVane, Browning's Parleyings: The Autobiography of a Mind (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1927), p. 221.

¹²Lairese, pp. 285-286.

¹³William Clyde DeVane, A Browning Handbook (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1935; rev. 1955), p. 230.

¹⁴William Clyde DeVane, "The Landscape of Browning's 'Childe Roland,'" PMLA, 40 (1925), 428-429.

¹⁵DeVane, "The Landscape of Browning's 'Childe Roland,'" p. 427.

¹⁶Lairese, p. 286.

¹⁷Lairese, p. 286.

¹⁸Lawrence Poston, "Browning and the Altered Romantic Landscape" in Nature and the Victorian Imagination, eds. U. C. Knoepfelmacher and G. B. Tennyson (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977), p. 437.

¹⁹King, p. 92.

²⁰King, p. 92.

²¹William Cadbury, "Lyric and Anti-lyric Forms: A Method for Judging Browning," University of Toronto Quarterly, 34 (October 1964), 57.

²²Cadbury, pp. 56-57.

²³Eugene Kintgen presents a good case for reading the poem as a record of a mental, rather than a physical, journey. Kintgen argues that Roland's surroundings are undoubtedly bleak, but the "perversity of the mind" of the poem's hero lends more horror to the landscape than it actually possesses. He concludes, "Roland is battling against himself, or against the more perverse aspects of himself, rather than against any outside challenges. . . ." See Eugene R. Kintgen, "Childe Roland and the Perversity of the Mind," Victorian Poetry, 4 (Autumn 1966), 253-258.

²⁴Orr, Mrs. Sutherland, A Handbook to the Works of Robert Browning (London: G. Bell and Sons, 1937), p. 273 n.

²⁵William Clyde DeVane and Kenneth Leslie Knickerbocker, New Letters of Robert Browning (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1950), pp. 172-173.

²⁶Lairesse, pp. 204-206.

²⁷DeVane, Autobiography of a Mind, p. 225.

²⁸DeVane, Autobiography of a Mind, p. 232.

²⁹DeVane, Autobiography of a Mind, p. xvi.

³⁰DeVane, Autobiography of a Mind, p. xvi.

³¹DeVane, Autobiography of a Mind, p. xvi.

³²DeVane, Autobiography of a Mind, p. 232.

³³Compare this passage to one Browning wrote more than fifty years before in Pauline:

No, ere the hot noon come,
Dive we down--safe! See this our new retreat
Walled in with a sloped mound of matted shrubs,
Dark, tangled, old and green, still sloping down
To a small pool whose waters lie asleep

Amid the trailing boughs turned water-plants:
And tall trees overarch to keep us in,
Breaking the sunbeams into emerald shafts, (ll. 748-755)

³⁴See Chapter V for a discussion of Browning's use of grotesque natural detail.

³⁵Irvine and Honan, pp. 10-11.

³⁶Irvine and Honan, pp. 10-11.

CHAPTER III

THE INFLUENCE OF THE PICTURESQUE AND THE SUBLIME

In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, English poets and painters gradually departed from the classical notion of men like Lairese that artistic landscapes should portray nature ideally, and they increasingly sought to render nature more believably, or at least in a way that seemed more in accord with common human perceptions of nature. The aesthetic categories of the picturesque and the sublime resulted from this shift in taste. Robert Browning certainly knew these terms; the words "picturesque" and "sublime" appear again and again in his letters and poems.¹ And given his appetite for reading and his avid interest in art, it seems likely that Browning had read at least some of the popular eighteenth century aesthetic treatises such as Edmund Burke's Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful, William Gilpin's Observations, Relative Chiefly to Picturesque Beauty, and Uvedale Price's On the Picturesque.² In any event, though Browning composed his poems after the wane in popularity of the picturesque and sublime, elements of picturesqueness and sublimity linger in passages from his letters and in a number of his poems.

In 1794 Uvedale Price published On the Picturesque and added the picturesque to the existing aesthetic classes of the sublime and the beautiful.³ Price attributed to the picturesque qualities of roughness, sudden variation and irregularity.⁴ These are, of course, more typical characteristics of nature than the ideal form and harmony insisted upon in

classical landscapes. Generally, the picturesque applied to quaint rural landscapes dotted with gnarled trees, moss-covered ruins, humble cottages, and simple, country folk. The picturesque satisfied the eighteenth-century man's sentimental longing to return to an uncomplicated past. For Browning also the beauty and charm of such landscapes proved attractive. Over the years, in his correspondence, Browning includes accounts of holidays spent in some rural retreat. In July 1849 Robert and Elizabeth found refuge from the oppressive heat of Florence in the cool tranquility of Bagni di Lucca. From there, Robert wrote to his sister Sarianna, describing how he passed the time: "This evening I climbed to the top of a mountain, over loose stones in the dry bed of a torrent, and under vines and chestnuts, till I reached an old deserted village. . . ." ⁵ In fact, Browning often wrote of such outings. Almost invariably he indicates his preference for secluded, out-of-the-way spots. It is not unusual for him to use one of the memorable places he visited as the setting for a poem.

Such was the case with "By the Fire-Side." According to DeVane this poem is autobiographical. The woman in the poem is Browning's wife, Elizabeth Barrett, and the chapel mentioned may be one the Brownings had seen on a trip to Prato Fiorito in September 1853. ⁶

In the poem the season is autumn. The speaker and his wife, both apparently middle-aged, are sitting by their fire-side. The speaker happily recalls a romantic afternoon outing in Italy when he and his wife were young. He remembers vividly the picturesque spot they visited and the little chapel they happened upon:

Look at the ruined chapel again
Half-way up in the Alpine gorge! (ll. 31-32)

The neglected, crumbling chapel set deep among the trees near a tumbling stream establishes the mood for the lovers' tranquility. The woods seem to enfold the young couple, forming a peaceful haven for them:

A turn, and we stand in the heart of things;
 The woods are round us, heaped and dim;
 From slab to slab how it slips and springs,
 The thread of water single and slim,
 Through the ravage some torrent brings! (ll. 36-40)

In stanzas ten through thirteen, the description of the unspoiled countryside continues. These stanzas exemplify Browning's tendency to supply rich, colorful detail in painting a scene:

On our other side is the straight-up rock;
 And a path is kept 'twixt the gorge and it
 By boulder-stones where lichens mock
 The marks on a moth, and small ferns fit
 Their teeth to the polished block.

Oh the sense of the yellow mountain-flowers,
 And thorny balls, each three in one,
 The chestnuts throw on our path in showers!
 For the drop of the woodland fruit's begun,
 These early November hours,

That crimson the creeper's leaf across
 Like a splash of blood, intense, abrupt,
 O'er a shield else gold from rim to boss,
 And lay it for show on the fairy-cupped
 Elf-needled mat of moss,

By the rose-flesh mushrooms, undivulged
 Last evening--nay, in to-day's first dew
 Yon sudden coral nipple bulged,
 Where a freaked fawn-coloured flaky crew
 Of toadstools peep indulged. (ll. 46-65)

The bright colors and exacting descriptions of lush vegetation remind the reader of a Pre-Raphaelite painting. Only a close observer of nature would render the setting so precisely.

Stanzas fourteen and fifteen add to the picturesqueness of the scene with a description of the moss-covered, ivy-clad stones of the chapel and of a nearby bridge spanning a still pond. The simple rustic people (stanza seventeen) and the grazing sheep (stanza twenty) harmonize with their natural surroundings.

The speaker's reminiscing is briefly interrupted when he pauses to address his wife in the twenty-first stanza. He credits her with his delight in the present and with his complacent attitude toward growing old. In a stark, frightening comparison, typical of the sublime, the speaker notes that many liken aging to approaching "a crag's sheer edge" (l. 106). Though he recognizes that the prospect of old age holds such horror for some, the speaker eagerly anticipates the future. He wonders:

To think how little I dreamed it [passage of time] led
 To an age so blest that, by its side,
 Youth seems the waste instead? (ll. 123-125)

The speaker perceives that he and his wife have found the harmony they witnessed in nature on the mountainside. So close are they in spirit that they anticipate each other's thoughts and desires (stanzas twenty-four and twenty-eight). They have achieved a spiritual unity born of the "moment, one and infinite" (l. 181) when "The sights we saw and the sounds we heard, / The lights and the shades made up a spell" (ll. 188-189).

In the last stanzas of the poem, the speaker dwells on the culmination of that memorable day, on the moment shared with his future wife which enhanced and strengthened their commitment to each other:

I am named and known by that moment's feat;
 There took my station and degree;

So grew my own small life complete,
 As nature obtained her best of me--
 One born to love you, sweet! (ll. 251-255)

The landscape described in "By the Fire-Side" is one of the most fully drawn in Browning's poetry. For the speaker of the poem, the landscape is memorable because it is the site of the fulfillment of his love. While the lovers admire their picturesque surroundings from the time of their arrival at the secluded spot, it is not until they have achieved oneness through love that nature is credited with contributing to their special moment:

The forests had done it; there they stood;
 We caught for a moment the powers at play:
 They had mingled us so, for once and good,
 Their work was done--we might go or stay,
 They relapsed to their ancient mood. (ll. 236-240)

According to Lawrence Poston, the speaker has invested [nature] with a special significance through the processes of association."⁷ Jacob Korg calls it more "a modern moment than a Romantic one" because the speaker does not feel

that he is one with nature, but that his intuitions have been confirmed by something distinct from himself, that his life and the alien life of the external world have intersected in a rare, miraculous meeting.⁸

In other words, though nature plays such a dramatic role in this poem, Browning does not use it as Wordsworth would have. Nature does not guide or instruct the lovers. As Poston points out, ". . . Nature is not a perpetual teacher, only a momentary contributor to the lovers' union, and sharply separated from them. . . ." ⁹

Use of picturesque detail (the ruined chapel, rustic folk and beasts, unspoiled natural surroundings) is particularly appropriate in "By the Fire-Side." Just as the picturesque movement in art revealed an attempt to recapture an idealized past in nature, so the speaker in the poem tries through sentimental daydreaming to recapture the idealized past of his youth. Moreover, in "By the Fire-Side," Browning uses a picturesque landscape to prepare the reader for the couple's experience. Donald Hair notes that for the man and woman "when the moment of vision comes, it is closely associated with the natural setting. . . ."10 One can hardly imagine such a moment having occurred in a noisy, crowded marketplace in Rome; the rustic charm of the mountain retreat supplies a fitting background for the "good moment" the lovers share.

"By the Fire-Side" may be compared with "Two in the Campagna." Though the nature of the relationship of each of the pairs of lovers is strikingly different, the settings of the poems are similar.

Like "By the Fire-Side," "Two in the Campagna" has a natural picturesque setting, this time the open area surrounding Rome, known as the *campagna*, a place where Robert and Elizabeth had often picnicked with friends. Once the site of imposing city structures, the *campagna* affords rich grazing lands for the sheep and cattle that stray among the crumbled ruins.

A man and woman wander about the overgrown ruins, but they do not possess and cannot attain the sense of oneness enjoyed by the lovers in "By the Fire-Side." Such union beckons to them but escapes them. Browning uses the setting to emphasize their dilemma. Whereas nature and the lovers existed in harmony in "By the Fire-Side," in "Two in the Campagna,"

nature seems to taunt the couple. The elusive, close relationship they seek is compared by the man to various workings of nature--first to the tangled net of the spider:

For me, I touched a thought, I know,
 Has tantalized me many times,
 (Like turns of thread the spiders throw
 Mocking across our path) (11. 6-9)

then to the pollen scattered haphazardly by the breeze:

Help me to hold it! First it left
 The yellowing fennel, run to seed
 There, branching from the brickwork's cleft,
 Some old tomb's ruin: yonder weed
 Took up the floating weft, (11. 11-15)

and to sightless insects searching for nourishment:

Where one small orange cup amassed
 Five beetles,--blind and green they grope
 Among the honey-meal (11. 16-18)

But the landscape reminds him of more than his own frustrations. He also seems to perceive the contrast between the "unreflecting profusion of life and love in nature" typified by "the fennel scattering its seed, the endless feathery grasses, [and] the flowers in pollen-time" and the sterile distance separating him from the woman.¹¹ "As he surveys the scenery of the Campagna," says Ian Jack, "he sees everything growing and changing, and appeals to the lady for openness."¹² He urges his companion:

Let us be unashamed of soul,
 As earth lies bare to heaven above!
 How is it under our control
 To love or not to love? (11. 32-25)

The man argues for love, but the woman is apparently uncertain, hesitates, and their chance for the "good minute" (l. 50) passes. The speaker again finds an appropriate metaphor for his situation in nature when he asks:

Already how am I so far
 Out of that minute? Must I go
 Still like the thistle-ball, no bar,
 Onward, whenever light winds blow,
 Fixed by no friendly star? (ll. 51-55)

In this poem, the picturesque landscape would seem to supply the perfect setting for a spiritual merging, but the lovers cannot surmount the intangible obstacles between them. William DeVane maintains that:

The central problem in his [Browning's] love poetry is communication between the sexes. Love exists in and through intuition, and is perfect when the lovers transcend the barriers of their separate individualities as they do in "By the Fire-Side" ; it is destroyed by too much ratiocination¹³

These lovers, at least the woman, seem unable to trust intuition. Because of this inhibition, nature in "Two in the Campagna" serves as a sharp, ironic contrast to the relationship of the lovers rather than as a complement to it as it did in "By the Fire-Side."

The picturesque figures once again in "The Italian in England," the story of an Italian rebel who evades his Austrian pursuers with the help of an Italian peasant girl. The "dry green old aqueduct" (l. 7) where the young man hides is suggestive of Italy's decline, the loss of the power and glory of the past. The scenic details are few, but it is as if nature, along with the daring country girl, conspires to protect the rebel, for he is described as crouching in the ruined waterway "Up to the neck in ferns and cress," (l. 18) his hideaway lighted only by "The

fire-flies from the roof above,/ Bright creeping thro' the moss they love" (ll. 9-10). A descriptive phrase here, a line there, suffices. The reader easily imagines the rude countryside around Padua, the simple people who "work among the Maize" (l. 24), and the string of mules plodding behind the peasants as they turn homeward after the day's labor.

Used as an appropriate setting for the stories of lovers and romantic heroes in "By the Fire-Side," "Two in the Campagna," and "The Italian in England," the picturesque functions very differently in "Up at a Villa--Down in the City." The speaker of this poem, "an Italian person of quality," lives in the country to escape the exorbitant cost of living in town but finds life there tedious and longs for the excitement of the bustling city.

He expresses dissatisfaction with his "picturesque" villa, saying:

Well now, look at our villa! stuck like the horn of a bull
Just on a mountain-edge as bare as the creature's skull,
Save a mere shag of a bush with hardly a leaf to pull! (ll. 7-9)

In town, by contrast, the houses and shops are situated in neat rows around the square so that one may conveniently "watch who crosses and gossips, who saunters, who hurries by;" (l. 14).

The speaker criticizes not only the scenery in the country, but the weather as well:

. . . Though winter be over in March by rights,
'T is May perhaps ere the snow shall have withered well off the
heights:
You've the brown ploughed land before, where the oxen steam and
wheeze,
And the hills over-smoked behind by the faint-grey olive-trees.
(ll. 17-20)

Summer is no better, for with it comes unbearable heat. But the heat never becomes oppressive in the city where "There's a fountain to spout and splash!" (l. 26)

Bored by the monotony of the rural lifestyle, the speaker complains:

All the year long at the villa, nothing to see though you linger,
 Except yon cypress that points like death's lean lifted forefinger.
 Some think fireflies pretty, when they mix i' the corn and mingle.
 Or thrid the stinking hemp till the stalks of it seem a-tingle.
 Late August or early September, the stunning cicala is shrill,
 And the bees keep their tiresome whine round the resinous firs on
 the hill. (ll. 31-36)

The endless variety of sights and sounds in the city appeals to him:

Ere you open your eyes in the city, the blessed churchbells begin:
 No sooner the bells leave off than the diligence rattles in:
 You get the pick of the news, and it costs you never a pin. (ll. 38-40)

.....
 Noon strikes,--here sweeps the procession! . . .
Bang-whang-whang goes the drum, tootle-te-tootle the fife;
 No keeping one's haunches still: it's the greatest pleasure in
life. (ll. 51, 53-54)

Donald Hair labels "Up at a Villa" an inverted pastoral, for the speaker associates the ideal life with the city, not the country, as the quoted passages indicate.¹⁴ In fact, everything that the devotee of the pastoral and picturesque delights in, the speaker disdains. He is interested in communing, not with nature, but with other people. For Browning, both were important.

Browning always enjoyed social gatherings. In the years following his wife's death, he became an increasingly prominent social figure. Still, in autumn he eagerly retreated from the demands of London society to some secluded alpine spot. The quiet and solitude he found in nature

were restorative. Unlike the narrator of "Up at a Villa," Browning did not feel lonely or bored. He apparently luxuriated in the tranquility. Writing to F. J. Furnivall in 1887, he said:

I have no few acquaintances here St. Moritz, Switzerland --nay, some old friends--but my intimates are the firs on the hill-side, and the myriad butterflies all about it, every bright wing of them under the snow to-day.¹⁵

In addition to his fondness for picturesque scenery, Browning found sublime prospects appealing. The sublime generally refers to those natural objects whose vastness or grandeur inspire awe and terror in the reader or viewer--more particularly to such geographic features as oceans, mountains and deserts or to such natural forces as earthquakes, floods, volcanoes, and storms.

Apparent throughout Browning's letters (and poetry) is his love of mountains. A typical passage is one taken from a letter of September 1878 to his friend Mrs. Charles Skirrow describing a visit with his sister to Splugen, Switzerland. Browning writes, "We are in the midst of exquisite scenery, in which we walk daily for some four or five hours at a stretch--generally managing seventeen miles about, in that time."¹⁶ The "keen mountain-air and never-ceasing wind" exhilarate him.¹⁷ He reports that his

favorite trudge is up the St. Bernardine-road to Hinterrhein, a village above eight mi[les] off, where, from a glacier on the mountain-top close by, the Rhine springs. Nothing can exceed the beauty of the valley,--as deeply green at this moment, as if Spring were just begun.¹⁸

Of St. Aubin, which he visited eight years before in 1870, he writes to Annie Egerton Smith saying "The wildness, savageness of the place,

its quiet and remoteness, suit me exactly."¹⁹

Browning's love of mountains is characteristic of the nineteenth-century attitude, yet aesthetic appreciation of mountains was relatively new. As Marjorie Nicolson explains in Mountain Gloom and Mountain Glory, through the seventeenth century, people generally thought of mountains as oppressive.²⁰ Because travel was so difficult, especially in mountainous regions, people, associating mountains with the unknown and the perilous, considered them deformities of nature. However, after the Peace of Ryswick quieted the dissension between England and France in 1697, the European Grand Tour became fashionable.²¹ Eighteenth and early nineteenth-century young men (Robert Browning among them) completed their education by visiting the capitals of western Europe, journeying over the Alps in the course of their tour. As travel became easier, mountains began to inspire awe rather than terror. Young men set out, eagerly anticipating the passage over the Alps and the natural wonders they would witness. The aesthetic influence of the Grand Tour cannot be underestimated. Russell Noyes, in fact, credits the Grand Tour with cultivating the taste for landscape art in general. He maintains, "The passage through the Alps, the journey through Italy, and the contact with Italian landscape painting opened up a whole new world of aesthetic appreciation for landscape."²²

Probably the artistic contact most valuable for the development of a British appreciation of the sublime was exposure to the work of the Italian painter Salvator Rosa (1615-1673). Noyes summarizes:

Salvator Rosa generally chose to represent wild and grotesque places, precipices and great rock masses of fantastic form, cascades and torrents, desolate ruins, caves, trees of dense

growth, or shattered boughs, and the whole peopled with banditti or uncouth characters, or with some classical or Biblical characters whose stories reflect horror or cruelty.²³

The sublime also surfaced in seventeenth-century literature in the grand style and the "great scenes of cosmic perspective" in Milton's Paradise Lost and Paradise Regained.²⁴ In the eighteenth century the popular "excursion" poetry and the Gothic novel sustained the taste for the sublime which was heightened by the Romantics, most notably by Byron and Shelley.

The regard for sublimity continued through much of the Victorian era, invigorated by nineteenth-century scientific explorations and mountain-climbing expeditions. British exploration of the Arctic began in 1818, and those at home followed each venture closely. Chauncey Loomis points out that while explorers' reports were factual and objective, the public imagination concocted romantic images of a frozen wasteland. Loomis says, "Like the sublimity of mountains or space, the sublimity of the Arctic partly depended on its imagined emptiness as well as its vastness and coldness."²⁵ These features were emphasized in contemporary paintings of Arctic scenes.

Photographs as well as paintings resulted from the mid-century vogue for mountain climbing. The Alpine Club formed in 1857 attracted such famous members as Leslie Stephen and John Ruskin and spurred numerous expeditions.²⁶

These influences, of course, filtered into literature as well. Browning's use of the sublime, then, is not surprising. Browning employed the sublime primarily as he employed the picturesque--to create an appropriate mood.

The setting of "A Grammarian's Funeral," for instance, is fittingly sublime. The Grammarian's students have chosen a mountaintop as the burial site for their revered master. Dawn is breaking as the students begin their ascent, bearing the coffin to the mountain peak. The poem traces the students' journey as they "wind . . . up the heights," (l. 21) climbing slowly with their burden to where "the way winds narrowly" (l. 91). The tranquil countryside is left behind:

Leave we the common crofts, the vulgar thorpes
 Each in its tether
 Sleeping safe on the bosom of the plain, (ll. 3-5)

The speaker, one of the students, proclaims that the summit is "the appropriate country" (l. 9) for the burial; there the mind is inspired with "rarer, intenser" thoughts (l. 10). All the stark, awful grandeur surfaces in the description of the proposed place of interment:

All the peaks soar, but one the rest excels;
 Clouds overcome it;
 No! yonder sparkle is the citadel's
 Circling its summit.
 Thither our path lies; wind we up the heights: (ll. 17-21)

Yet all other description is surpassed by the sublime splendor of the closing scene:

Here--here's his place, where meteors shoot, clouds form,
 Lightnings are loosened,
 Stars come and go! Let joy break with the storm,
 Peace let the dew send!
 Lofty designs must close in like effects:
 Loftily lying,
 Leave him--still loftier than the world suspects,
 Living and dying. (ll. 141-148)

The student exults in his master's achievement and suggests that nature also celebrates and helps to proclaim the grammarian's worth.

The natural details in "Prospice" are especially well-suited to the defiant tone of the poem. In this lyric Browning draws on some of the characteristic sources of sublime terror to typify Death: "The fog in my throat," the "mist in my face," "the snows," "the blasts," the "power of night," "the press of the storm" (ll. 1-5). Yet he denies fear and welcomes the contest: "I was ever a fighter, so--one fight more, / The best and the last!" (ll. 13-14).

Awe-inspiring natural forces--fog, night, wind, mist, snowstorm--create tension in the poem and prepare the reader for the speaker's struggle and his sense of triumph when "the journey is done and the summit attained" (l. 9). The horror of death itself, of the unknown, suggested by mist, fog, and night, is replaced at the end of the poem by the speaker's exultation in the knowledge of what awaits him after death, for then

. . . the elements' rage, the fiend-voices that rave,
 Shall dwindle, shall blend,
 Shall change, shall become first a peace out of pain,
 Then a light, then thy breast,
 O thou soul of my soul! I shall clasp thee again,
 And with God be the rest! (ll. 23-28)

In "La Saisiaz," another poem inspired by thoughts of death, the sublimity of a mountaintop offers an apt site for meditation. In the summer of 1877, Robert, with his sister Sarianna and a close friend, Annie Egerton Smith, traveled to Paris and then on to Collonge. There they lodged at the foot of Mt. Saleve in a chalet called "La Saisiaz" or "The Rock-cleft."²⁷ They enjoyed six weeks of hiking and swimming.

A few days before their scheduled departure, Miss Smith suggested to Robert that the two of them climb Mt. Saleve. The very morning appointed for their climb, Miss Smith was found dead in her room. Several days later, the poet climbed the mountain alone. "La Saisiaz" was written in November of that same year and addressed to Anne Smith. It begins as a personal tribute to her, widens to reflection about the possibility of immortality, and narrows at the close to focus once more on her whose death has occasioned the meditation.

The poem opens with the narrator, Browning himself, poised at the mountain's peak, looking down at Collonge where Anne Smith's body is buried. He describes his climb:

. . . every side my glance was bent
 O'er the grandeur and the beauty lavished through the whole ascent.
 Ledge by ledge, out broke new marvels, now minute and now immense;
 Earth's most exquisite disclosure, heaven's own God in evidence!
 And no berry in its hiding, no blue space in its outspread,
 Pleaded to escape my footstep, challenged my emerging head,
 (As I climbed or paused from climbing, now o'erbranched by shrub
 and tree,
 Now built round by rock and boulder, now at just a turn set free,
 Stationed face to face with--Nature? rather with Infinitude) (ll. 3-11)

F. E. L. Priestley maintains that the progression upward is particularly significant. "As he [Browning] now completes the climb alone, it becomes for him a symbolic act: the movement upward, each part of which reveals new scenes, new vistas, new perspectives, suggests the journey of life. . . .²⁸

Only five days before, he had expected to have a hiking companion. He pauses now to consider how odd it is that in the course of five short days, little changes in nature:

Five short days, sufficient hardly to entice, from out its den
 Splintered in the slab, this pink perfection of the cyclamen;

Scarce enough to heal and coat with amber gum the sloe-tree's gash,
Bronze the clustered wilding apple, redden ripe the mountain-ash:
(11. 15-18)

And yet, as he stands looking out over the vast space which stretches between the summit of Saleve and the town of Collonge below, he realizes that five days have been sufficient time for an overwhelming barrier, a barrier "without a bound" (l. 20), to be placed between him and his friend.

Browning is profoundly affected by the intervening distance. Priestley notes that "The abyss between the summit and Collonge suggests the barrier separating living and dead. . . ."29

Browning is led to wonder whether he will ever see Anne Smith again, in other words, whether there is life after death. He contends that life on earth is mostly pain:

I must say--or choke in silence--'Howsoever
came my fate,
Sorrow did and joy did nowise--life well weighed,--
preponderate.' (11. 333-334)

Still, though man's knowledge is limited, though perpetual change in fortune and condition characterizes his life, he does make discernible progress:

Since time means amelioration, tardily enough displayed,
Yet a mainly onward moving, never wholly retrograde.
We know more though we know little, we grow stronger
though still weak, (11. 415-417)

He concludes that there must be life after death, a place

where that lady lives of whom enamoured was my soul'--
where this
Other lady, my companion dear and true, she also is? (11. 215-216)

For Browning, there must be life after death, a better life, another progression, or this life is meaningless.

The sublime setting of "La Saisiaz" is powerfully provocative. It inspires the poet's reflections. The vast expanse of space upon which Browning gazes is relatively comparable to the vast expanse of time he considers when he ponders immortality--an awesome site, an awesome subject.

Irvine and Honan assert, "For Browning music was the purest and the profoundest of the arts."³⁰ As a child he studied under John Relfe who served as musician to George III; as a mature poet, he gave expression to his great love of music in several poems. In his first-published poem, Pauline, the poet-speaker proclaims the superiority of music over the other arts:

. . . I sought out some pursuit;
 And song rose, no new impulse but the one
 With which all others best could be combined.

 For music (which is earnest of a heaven,
 Seeing we know emotions strange by it,
 Not else to be revealed,) is like a voice,
 A low voice calling fancy, as a friend,
 To the green woods in the gay summer time:
 And she fills all the way with dancing shapes
 Which have made painters pale (ll. 357-359; 365-371)

But in no other poem has Browning spoken more movingly about music than in "Abt Vogler." The purpose of the poem, says Ian Jack, is "to express the effect of music on the human soul."³¹ Browning recreates that effect using imagery characteristic of the sublime.

Abt Vogler, the title character, was a brilliant extemporizer of the early nineteenth century. In the poem, he is pictured alone at his organ, creating a "palace of music" (l. 57) and thinking aloud about his artistic accomplishments:

Surveying awhile the heights I rolled from into the deep;
Which, hark, I have dared and done (ll. 94-95)

With descriptions of the infinite expanse of space, of vivid light bursting in the heavens, Browning emphasizes the unearthly power of music to revitalize the listener:

Novel splendours burst forth, grew familiar and dwelt with mine,
Not a point nor peak but found and fixed its wandering star;
Meteor-moons, balls of blaze: and they did not pale nor pine,
For earth had attained to heaven, there was no more near nor
far. (ll. 29-32)

Music approaches the divine:

The high that proved too high, the heroic for earth too hard,
The passion that left the ground to lose itself in the sky,
Are music sent up to God by the lover and the bard; (ll. 77-79)

Through his music the organist can transport the spirits of his listeners. The sublime helps to give the reader of "Abt Vogler" a sense of that transport.

In a few poems, notably "Love Among the Ruins" and "De Gustibus--," Browning contrasts the picturesque with the sublime.

"Love Among the Ruins" fittingly appeared as the first lyric in volume one of Men and Women, for it is one of Browning's most celebrated works. Like "By the Fire-Side" and "Two in the Campagna" which both contain picturesque passages, "Love Among the Ruins" is a love poem, but it contains more vivid picturesque passages (as well as some sublime descriptions) than either of them.

In fact, the reader is immediately plunged into a picturesque setting in the first lines of the poem which are reminiscent of Thomas Gray's

"Elegy in a Country Churchyard":

Where the quiet-coloured end of evening smiles
 Miles and miles
 On the solitary pastures where our sheep
 Half-asleep
 Tinkle homeward thro' the twilight, stray or stop
 As they crop-- (ll. 1-6)

In these lines Browning has conveyed the mood of a peaceful rural scene as skillfully as any artist's brush might have.

In the poem, a young man awaits the coming of his love on the site of an ancient fortress which has long since fallen into ruin. As he contemplates the city which once thrived on the desolate spot, the reader's attention is continually shifted from the picturesque serenity of the present to the thrilling sublimity of the past. Ian Jack explains, "Throughout the poem the present is juxtaposed with the past, as the thoughts of the narrator move from the quiet, lonely beauty of the present scene to the barbaric splendours of the past."³² Stanza four is exemplary:

Now,--the single little turret that remains
 On the plains,
 By the caper overrooted, by the gourd
 Overscored,
 While the patching houseleek's head of blossom winks
 Through the chinks--
 Marks the basement whence a tower in ancient time
 Sprang sublime,
 And a burning ring, all round, the chariots traced
 As they raced,
 And the monarch and his minions and his dames
 Viewed the games. (ll. 37-48)

As the setting of "Love Among the Ruins" indicates, Browning was intrigued by evidence of diminished, but once glorious, civilizations.

DeVane claims, "the idea of the necessary subjection of antiquity to the uses of the modern world engrossed him more and more as he grew older."³³ But Browning was not alone. Shelley's sonnet "Ozymandias" (a poem that Browning, as an admirer of Shelley undoubtedly knew) develops just such a theme.

Johnstone Parr has demonstrated, furthermore, that "in the mid-nineteenth century there was widespread and stirring public interest in the discovery and excavation of ancient capital cities. . . ." ³⁴ During the 1840's and early 1850's, archaeologists unearthed temples, palaces, and fortresses of ancient Babylonia and Assyria. Books detailing the discoveries activated public interest, and articles in popular magazines sustained it. Parr draws a parallel between Browning's poem and these journalistic reports: "Prominent in all the accounts of Nineveh and Babylon was the fact that the present sites of these cities, like those of the Italian Campagna, were almost completely barren and desolate."³⁵ Certainly people would have been fascinated; such discoveries would naturally have stirred the imaginations of Browning and his contemporaries. But enthusiasm such as that which Parr reports can also be viewed as the Victorian outgrowth of a British fondness for the picturesque. Leonee Ormond points out, "Like many of his generation, he [Browning] was conscious of the picturesqueness of decay."³⁶

Browning's artistic purpose in using the setting was not to glorify the ruins or the past they represent, but instead to establish a suitable background for the lovers' meeting. Therefore, the past is recreated with sublime images of passion and violence while the present and the near future, which promises the reunion of the lovers, are presented with

picturesque images associated with beauty and love.

The title of Browning's "De Gustibus--" comes from the Latin proverb "De gustibus non est disputandum": there is no use disputing tastes. The speaker in the poem expresses his love for Italy, especially the Italian landscape:

What I love best in all the world
Is a castle, precipice-encurled,
In a gash of the wind-grieved Apennine. (ll. 14-16)

He admires also the ancient cypress trees, the expanse of blue sea. Yet he is aware that his listener prefers the beanflowers and blackbirds of an English spring--that his heart inclines toward "an English lane/ By a cornfield-side a-flutter with poppies" (ll. 3-4).

In this poem Browning has devised a speaker who voices a preference for the more sublime scenery of Italy. Yet the brief picturesque description of the English spring (ll. 1-13) is as exquisite as the more lengthy description of the natural beauty of Italy (ll. 14-46). Interestingly enough, this is the only poem of the Men and Women collection to contain "a glimpse of genuine English landscape."³⁷ Moreover, descriptions of distinctly English scenery are rare throughout Browning's work. The few that do exist though, including the passage from "De Gustibus--," reveal Browning's love of the English countryside. Donald Smalley suggests that in regard to the debate in "De Gustibus--," ". . . Browning's own ghost would have had a hard time choosing which of the scenes he would most like to revisit."³⁸

Again and again in his poetry, Browning selects and arranges natural details to create either a picturesque or a sublime landscape--one which

will supply a fitting backdrop for his character's actions or thoughts. And while they are secondary to character portrayal in each poem, the landscapes do have emotional impact of their own. The landscape in "By the Fire-Side," for example, seems to share the lovers' joy while nature seems to tease and taunt the couple in "Two in the Campagna." And in "The Grammarian's Funeral," the soaring mountains contribute a dignified solemnity to the commemoration of the scholar.

The eighteenth-century aesthetic modes of the picturesque and the sublime attributed emotional impact to landscapes; this was perhaps their greatest contribution to the development of nineteenth-century nature poetry and landscape painting. Christopher Hussey, in fact, views the picturesque as an essential prelude to romanticism, claiming "the picturesque interregnum between classic and romantic art was necessary in order to enable the imagination to form the habit of feeling through the eyes."³⁹ Hussey's comment applies to the sublime as well. Especially in the kind of response expected, picturesque and sublime art anticipated Romantic, for while classic art had demanded a rational, intellectual reaction, picturesque and sublime art emphasized an emotional response to the aesthetically satisfying, just as Romantic art was to do. And it is the Romantic treatment of nature and its influence on Browning's work which is the subject of the next chapter.

ENDNOTES TO CHAPTER III

¹Leslie N. Broughton and Benjamin F. Stelter in A Concordance to the Poems of Robert Browning, 2 vols. (New York: G. E. Stechert and Company, 1924) list 19 instances of the word "sublime" and 11 instances of the word "picturesque" in Browning's poetry.

²Interestingly enough, Elizabeth Barrett knew and corresponded with Uvedale Price. She wrote a commemorative poem on the occasion of his death in 1829. I have not been able to find any evidence that Robert knew or ever corresponded with him or that Robert had read Price's essays on aesthetics.

³Uvedale Price, On the Picturesque: With an Essay on the Origin of Taste and Much Original Matter, ed. Sir Thomas Dick Lauder (Edinburgh: Caldwell, Lloyd and Company, 1842), p. 80.

⁴Price, p. 82.

⁵Thurman L. Hood, ed., Letters of Robert Browning Collected by Thomas J. Wise (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1933), p. 25.

⁶William Clyde DeVane, A Browning Handbook (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1955), p. 222.

⁷Lawrence Poston, "Browning and the Altered Romantic Landscape" in Nature and the Victorian Imagination, eds. U. C. Knoepfelmacher and G. B. Tennyson (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977), p. 430.

⁸Jacob Korg, "Browning's Art and 'By the Fire-Side,'" Victorian Poetry, 15 (1970), 148-149.

⁹Poston, p. 431.

¹⁰Donald S. Hair, Browning's Experiments with Genre (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1972), p. 98.

¹¹Donald Smalley, "Notes" in Poems of Robert Browning, ed. Donald Smalley (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin Company, 1956), p. 515.

¹²Ian Jack, Browning's Major Poetry (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973), p. 142).

¹³DeVane, Handbook, p. 209.

¹⁴Hair, p. 97.

- ¹⁵Hood, p. 268.
- ¹⁶William Clyde DeVane and Kenneth Leslie Knickerbocker, New Letters of Robert Browning (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1950), p. 248.
- ¹⁷DeVane and Knickerbocker, p. 248.
- ¹⁸DeVane and Knickerbocker, p. 248.
- ¹⁹Hood, p. 140.
- ²⁰Marjorie Hope Nicolson, Mountain Gloom and Mountain Glory: The Development of the Aesthetics of the Infinite (New York: Cornell University Press, 1959), p. 3.
- ²¹Russell Noyes, Wordsworth and the Art of Landscape (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1968), p. 8.
- ²²Noyes, pp. 8-9.
- ²³Noyes, p. 9.
- ²⁴Nicolson, p. 273.
- ²⁵Chauncey Loomis, "The Arctic Sublime," in Nature and the Victorian Imagination, eds. U. C. Knoepfelmacher and G. B. Tennyson (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977), p. 110.
- ²⁶David Robertson, "Mid-Victorians Amongst the Alps" in Nature and the Victorian Imagination, eds. U. C. Knoepfelmacher and G. B. Tennyson (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977), p. 120.
- ²⁷William Irvine and Park Honan, The Book, the Ring, and the Poet (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1974), p. 488.
- ²⁸F. E. L. Priestley, "A Reading of 'La Saisiaz'" in Robert Browning: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Philip Drew (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin Company, 1966), p. 243.
- ²⁹Priestley, p. 243.
- ³⁰Irvine and Honan, p. 7.
- ³¹Jack, p. 257.
- ³²Jack, pp. 140-141.
- ³³DeVane, Handbook, p. 213.
- ³⁴Johnstone Parr, "The Site and Ancient City of Browning's 'Love Among the Ruins,'" PMLA, 68 (1953), 128.

³⁵Parr, p. 133.

³⁶Leonee Ormond, "Browning and Painting" in Writers and Their Background: Robert Browning, ed. Isobel Armstrong (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1975), p. 199.

³⁷DeVane, Handbook, p. 258.

³⁸Smalley, p. 513.

³⁹Christopher Hussey, The Picturesque (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1927), p. 4.

CHAPTER IV

THE INFLUENCE OF THE ROMANTIC MOVEMENT

Robert Browning was born into an English aesthetic climate dominated by the Romantic perspective. Browning knew well the work of the Romantics. He was a passionate disciple of Shelley in youth, a long-time admirer of Byron, and, late in life, a member of the Wordsworth Society.¹ The Romantic influence on Browning was considerable.

For purposes of this study, however, it will be both necessary and sufficient to restrict the discussion to the ways in which the Romantic poets affected how Browning saw nature and how he used natural settings in his own poems. From his close imitations of Shelley's style and imagery to his incorporation of general Romantic themes, from his celebration of the "wilder, freer forms of nature" to his fondness for the ordinary and humble, Browning drew on Romanticism in his natural detail.

The late eighteenth, early nineteenth-century English Romantic movement marked a major shift in the subject matter of poetry. Until Alexander Pope, poetry emphasized man. Detailed landscapes were described in pastoral poetry, but these were artificial, idealized scenes. As Myra Reynolds notes in The Treatment of Nature in English Poetry: Between Pope and Wordsworth, only those aspects of nature which could be transformed by man and made subordinate to him were appreciated.² In the eighteenth century, as travel became easier and more popular, poetic descriptions of nature (often picturesque or sublime) became more varied and more life-like. Still, it was not until the Romantic movement that

poets concentrated on nature. Reynolds summarizes the shift that the Romantics effected:

The new feeling toward Nature as exemplified in the early-nineteenth-century poets, especially Wordsworth . . . is marked by full and first-hand observation, by a rich, sensuous delight in form, color, sound, and motion; by a strong preference for the wilder, freer forms of Nature's life, [and] by an enthusiasm for Nature passionate in its intensity. . . .³

Never before had there been such extended, unrestrained celebrations of nature.

But nature was not described for its own sake. The Romantics, operating out of the traditions of the artistic and poetic categories of the picturesque and the sublime, used nature to convey the artist's feelings and to motivate emotional responses in the reader. W. F. Axton points out that during the Romantic period, "minute, literal detail" was emphasized,⁴ but not so much to record the scene exactly as to relate the poet's feelings about the scene. The Romantics believed that the poet, by cultivating his sensitivity to the beauties of nature, by making himself receptive, could develop a sympathy which would enable him to enter imaginatively into the life of the natural world. Accordingly, through his poetry, Wordsworth shares with his readers the feelings that overwhelmed him as he gazed at a field of daffodils or as he watched the day break from Westminster Bridge. The daffodils and the dawn serve as vehicles for the poet's sympathetic response to his surroundings. It is not, then, the intent of the Romantic poet (or painter) to produce a literal recreation of nature. Instead, appearances in nature motivate the artist's subjective reflection and that reflection and the corresponding feelings are the true subject of the work of art.

Critics have long recognized that Browning was working out of the Romantic tradition. The influence of Romanticism is especially noticeable in Browning's first poems, for, in his earliest poetry, Browning is prone to extensive natural description and subjective reflection.

Pauline: A Fragment of a Confession appeared anonymously in March 1833 as Browning's first published work.⁵ Though he mingled the dramatic with the lyric mode in the poem, the autobiographical element is unmistakable and caused Browning considerable embarrassment in later years when he was forced to acknowledge authorship of the poem. For Pauline is an analysis of the nature of the literary artist, written in the form of a confessional spoken by a young poet to the woman he loves, the one person who can understand him. The poem has no strict, orderly arrangement. Instead, as Irvine and Honan have noted, "The progression of thought is associative and dramatic."⁶

Eager to disburden his soul, to expose his inmost longings and weaknesses to a compassionate audience, the poet tells Pauline of his agonizing struggle to overcome the restless yearnings of his artistic spirit. He recalls the innocent days of adolescence, and in the first of a series of vivid passages describing external nature, he likens that carefree time to the freshness of a memorable spring day:

Thou wilt remember one warm morn when winter
 Crept aged from the earth, and spring's first breath
 Blew soft from the moist hills; the black-thorn boughs,
 So dark in the bare wood, when glistening
 In the sunshine were white with coming buds,
 Like the bright side of a sorrow, and the banks
 Had violets opening from sleep like eyes. (ll. 55-61)

But as the speaker grows older, his sensitivity to his surroundings becomes less pleasurable; he feels more and more alienated from others. "I am made up of an intensest life" (l. 268), he reminds Pauline. He shares with her the monumental plans he made for his life--glorious, unrealistic, unrealizable plans. Despite the impossibility of reaching his goals, he followed the impulses of his ambitious spirit. He experienced life deeply. His sensitive Romantic nature allowed him to enter imaginatively into the lives of plants and animals:

I can live all the life of plants, and gaze
Drowsily on the bees that flit and play,
Or bare my breast for sunbeams which will kill,
Or open in the night of sounds, to look
For the dim stars; I can mount with the bird
Leaping airily his pyramid of leaves
And twisted boughs of some tall mountain tree,
Or rise cheerfully springing to the heavens;
Or like a fish breathe deep the morning air
In the misty sun-warm water; or with flower
And tree can smile in light at the sinking sun
Just as the storm comes, as a girl would look
On a departing lover--most serene. (ll. 716-728)

Comparing Browning to the Romantic poets, Stopford Brooke notes:

He [here referring both to the poet-speaker in Pauline and also to Browning, the poet-author of Pauline] does not think of himself as living in the whole Being of Nature, as Wordsworth or Shelley might have done But he does transfer himself into the rejoicing life of the animals and plants, a life which he knows is akin to his own.

More specifically, the speaker sees himself absorbing life from his surroundings and then giving it back through his art. He describes his creative life as:

. . . a clime where glittering mountain-tops
 And glancing sea and forests steeped in light
 Give back reflected the far-flashing sun; (ll. 362-364)

Yet his experiences, instead of invigorating and enlivening him, have brought a typical Romantic ennui, an insatiable longing for more such experiences. His artistic efforts, his craving to live life fully--to enjoy all pleasure, to possess all knowledge--have left him feeling older than his years.

He longs now to retreat with Pauline. He invites her to accompany him through her imagination to the site of their fantasy home. In the longest sustained passage of natural description in Browning's poetry, the speaker uses Gerard de Lairese's technique--a kind of twenty-four hour walking tour of the place he envisions, beginning at night and describing to Pauline the appearance of the landscape at successive hours of the day:

Night, and one single ridge of narrow path
 Between the sullen river and the woods
 Waving and muttering, for the moonless night
 Has shaped them into images of life,
 Like the uprising of the giant-ghosts,
 Looking on earth to know how their sons fare:
 Thou art so close by me, the roughest swell
 Of wind in the tree-tops hides not the panting
 Of thy soft breasts. No, we will pass to morning--
 Morning, the rocks and valleys and old woods.
 How the sun brightens in the mist, and here,
 Half in the air, like creatures of the place,
 Trusting the element, living on high boughs
 That swing in the wind--look at the silver spray
 Flung from the foam-sheet of the cataract
 Amid the broken rocks! Shall we stay here
 With the wild hawks? No, ere the hot noon come,
 Dive we down--safe! See this our new retreat
 Walled in with a sloped mound of matted shrubs,
 Dark, tangled, old and green, still sloping down
 To a small pool whose waters lie asleep
 Amid the trailing boughs turned water-plants:

And tall trees overarch to keep us in,
 Breaking the sunbeams into emerald shafts,
 And in the dreamy water one small group
 Of two or three strange trees are got together
 Wondering at all around, as strange beasts herd
 Together far from their own land: all wildness,
 No turf nor moss, for boughs and plants pave all,
 And tongues of bank to shelving in the lymph,
 Where the pale-throated snake reclines his head,
 And old grey stones lie making eddies there,
 The wild-mice cross them dry-shod. Deeper in!
 Shut thy soft eyes--now look--still deeper in!
 This the very heart of the woods all round
 Mountain-like heaped above us; yet even here⁸
 One pond of water gleams; far off the river
 Sweeps like a sea, barred out from land; but one--
 One thin clear sheet has overleaped and wound
 Into this silent depth, which gained, it lies
 Still, as but let by sufferance; the trees bend
 O'er it as wild men watch a sleeping girl,
 And through their roots long creeping plants out-stretch
 Their twined hair, steeped and sparkling; farther on,
 Tall rushes and thick flag-knots have combined
 To narrow it; so, at length, a silver thread,
 It winds, all noiselessly through the deep wood
 Till thro' a cleft-way, thro' the moss and stone,
 It joins its parent-river with a shout.

Up for the glowing day, leave the old woods!
 See, they part like a ruined arch: the sky!
 Nothing but sky appears, so close the roots
 And grass of the hill-top level with the air--
 Blue sunny air, where a great cloud floats laden
 With light, like a dead whale that white birds pick,
 Floating away in the sun in some north sea.
 Air, air, fresh life-blood, thin and searching air,
 The clear, dear breath of God that loveth us,
 Where small birds reel and winds take their delight!
 Water is beautiful, but not like air:
 See, where the solid azure waters lie
 Made as of thickened air, and down below,
 The fern-ranks like a forest spread themselves
 As though each pore could feel the element;
 Where the quick glancing serpent winds his way,
 Float with me there, Pauline!--but not like air.

Down the hill! Stop--a clump of trees, see, set
 On a heap of rock, which look o'er the far plain:
 So, envious climbing shrubs would mount to rest
 And peer from their spread boughs; wide they wave, looking
 At the muleteers who whistle on their way,

To the merry chime of morning bells, past all
 The little smoking cots, mid fields and banks
 And copses bright in the sun. My spirit wanders:
 Hedgerows for me--those living hedgerows where
 The bushes close and clasp above and keep
 Thought in--I am concentrated--I feel;
 But my soul saddens when it looks beyond:
 I cannot be immortal, taste all joy. (ll. 732-810)

Morse Peckham points out in "Browning and Romanticism" the thematic emphasis in Pauline on "the redemptive power of nature."⁹ The speaker expresses in this protracted description the Romantic belief that one can find fulfillment by becoming one with nature.

Finally, the poet recognizes that he is not self-sufficient, that what is lacking in his life is God. He asks, "And what is that I hunger for but God?" (l. 821) He has tried to deny God's existence though evidence of God's presence surrounds him. He confesses:

. . . do I not
 Pant when I read of thy consummate power,
 And burn to see thy calm pure truths out-flash
 The brightest gleams of earth's philosophy? (ll. 839-842)

And he is finally able to admit:

. . . Even from myself
 I need thee and I feel thee and I love thee. (ll. 825-826)

Throughout, Pauline displays the influence of Romanticism on the young Browning--in the speaker's self-indulgent introspection, in his emotional effusion, and in his detailed descriptions of nature. As an artist tortured by his own sensitive awareness and creative talent, the speaker of the poem is a decidedly Romantic figure. Ian Jack describes him as "a highly intellectual young man who feels immeasurably old and

who is haunted by that sense of ill-defined guilt which had long been a characteristic of the 'romantic hero.'"¹⁰

In reference to natural detail, DeVane proclaims that "in Pauline Browning's delight in nature is unrestrained. . . ." ¹¹ The natural detail in Pauline is certainly worth close attention if for no other reason than that nowhere else in Browning's work is it so extensive. Browning's fondness for secluded woodland spots and alpine retreats, natural settings which recur throughout his work, appears in this early poem. Jack concludes, "Several of the finest passages in Pauline are descriptions of external nature, and often (as in Shelley) external objects become a symbol for the feelings of the poet."¹² For instance, at one point, in a passage already quoted, the poet uses blazing light to represent his artistic power saying his creative life has been like

. . . a clime where glittering mountain-tops
And glancing sea and forests steeped in light
Give back reflected the far-flashing sun, (ll. 362-364)

Later, he sees himself as fragile and vulnerable like

A slight flower growing alone, and offering
Its frail cup of three leaves to the cold sun, (ll. 712-713)

Significant in both is the poet's sense of isolation.

The influence of Shelley is especially evident in this early effort of Browning's. At the age of fourteen, Browning had been given a copy of Shelley's poems, and, through his admiration for Shelley's work, he promptly converted to vegetarianism and atheism. The influence had lessened somewhat by the time Browning wrote Pauline six years later, but his reverence for Shelley is still evident in the poem. Most

notably, the speaker, using the metaphor of a natural spring, names Shelley, the "Sun-treader," as the source of his poetic inspiration:

As one should worship long a sacred spring
 Scarce worth a moth's flitting, which long grasses cross,
 And one small tree embowers droopingly--
 Joying to see some wandering insect won
 To live in its few rushes, or some locust
 To pasture on its boughs, or some wild bird
 Stoop for its freshness from the trackless air:
 And then should find it but the fountain-head,
 Long lost, of some great river. . . . (ll. 172-180)

Critics have often remarked that clearly the very style of Pauline shows the influence of Shelley's poetry, especially of Alastor. In DeVane's words, "The cadences, the fervor, and some of the images owe directly to Shelley."¹³ In Alastor, Shelley's monologist is also a poet who is prompted to ceaseless wandering by his insatiable appetite for knowledge. Longing for spiritual companionship, the poet pursues his phantom soul-mate--"the veiled maid" of his dreams--along a treacherous course that ultimately leads to death. Thinking that only through death can he be united with the woman of his dream vision, the poet sets out to sea in a tiny boat. Shelley describes the passing scenery as the hours pass and one day succeeds another. Browning's own descriptions of the twenty-four hour visit to an imaginary refuge are strikingly similar. Browning describes the noon hour thus:

. . . See this our new retreat
 Walled in with a sloped mound of matted shrubs,
 Dark, tangled, old and green, still sloping down
 To a small pool whose waters lie asleep
 Amid the trailing boughs turned water-plants:
 And tall trees overarch to keep us in,
 Breaking the sunbeams into emerald shafts,
 And in the dreamy water one small group

Of two or three strange trees are got together
 Wondering at all around, as strange beasts herd
 Together far from their own land: all wildness,
 No turf nor moss, for boughs and plants pave all, (ll. 749-760)

In Alastor, Shelley's account of the haven the poet reaches at noon reads as follows:

The noonday sun
 Now shone upon the forest, one vast mass
 Of mingling shade, whose brown magnificence
 A narrow vale embosoms.

More dark
 And dark the shades accumulate. The oak,
 Expanding its immense and knotty arms,
 Embraces the light beech. The pyramids
 Of the tall cedar overarching, frame
 Most solemn domes within, and far below,
 Like clouds suspended in an emerald sky,
 The ash and the acacia floating hang
 Tremulous and pale. (ll. 420-423; 430-438)¹⁴

In each, the sun filters through a maze of richly entwined foliage to shine brokenly on a wooded hollow.

Other parallels exist. For example, the speaker in Alastor sails into a cavern through which winds a narrow stream:

. . . The rivulet
 Wanton and wild, through many a green ravine
 Beneath the forest flowed. Sometimes it fell
 Among the moss, with hollow harmony
 Dark and profound. Now on the polished stones
 It danced: like childhood laughing as it went:
 Then, through the plain in tranquil wanderings crept,
 Reflecting every herb and drooping bud
 That overhung its quietness. (ll. 494-502)

The poet-speaker of Pauline also describes a stream:

One thin clear sheet has overleaped and wound
 Into this silent depth, which gained, it lies

Still, as but let by sufferance; the trees bend
 O'er it as wild men watch a sleeping girl,
 And through their roots long creeping plants out-stretch
 Their twined hair, steeped and sparkling; farther on,
 Tall rushes and thick flag-knots have combined
 To narrow it; so, at length, a silver thread,
 It winds, all noiselessly through the deep wood
 Till thro' a cleft-way, thro' the moss and stone,
 It joins its parent-river with a shout. (ll. 770-780)

The likenesses are too striking to dismiss as coincidence.

There are, of course, differences between the poems. Significantly, unlike Shelley's poet, Browning's does not go to his death. Transformed by his awareness of the love of Pauline and the benevolence of God, the speaker resolves to return with Pauline to an unspoiled region:

The land which gave me thee shall be our home,
 Where nature lies all wild amid her lakes
 And snow-swathed mountains and vast pines begirt
 With ropes of snow--where nature lies all bare. (ll. 951-954)

And, at the close of Pauline, the poet, calling on Shelley for continued inspiration, is able to affirm:

Sun-treader, I believe in God and truth
 And love. . . . (ll. 1020-1021)

and to assure him:

Know my last state is happy, free from doubt
 Or touch of fear. Love me and wish me well. (ll. 1030-1031)

Early reviews of Pauline, including those by Browning's friend, W. J. Fox, the editor of the Monthly Repository, and by Allan Cunningham of the Athenaeum, were quite favorable.¹⁵ However, the critique which made the most profound impression on Browning was that by John Stuart Mill. Fox

sent a copy of Pauline to Mill who made marginal notes in the book but never actually published a review of it. Fox returned the copy which Mill had annotated to Browning, probably in October 1833,¹⁶ although Mill had suggested that his comments were too blunt to be shown to the author: "on the whole the observations are not flattering to the author--perhaps too strong in the expression to be shown to him."¹⁷ In a summarizing comment on the flyleaf, Mill wrote, "A cento of most beautiful passages might be made from this poem, and the psychological history of himself [the speaker] is powerful and truthful. . . ."¹⁸ On the whole, however, he found the poem obscure and painfully introspective. He asserted:

With considerable poetic powers, the writer seems to me possessed with a more intense and morbid self-consciousness than I ever knew in any sane human being. . . . The self-seeking and self-worshipping state is well described--beyond that, I should think the writer had made, as yet, only the next step, viz. into despising his own state. I even question whether part even of that self-disdain is not assumed. He is evidently dissatisfied, and feels part of the badness of his state; he does not write as if it were purged out of him. If he once could muster a hearty hatred of his selfishness it would go; as it is, he feels only the lack of good, not the positive evil. He feels not remorse, but only disappointment; a mind in that state can only be regenerated by some new passion, and I know not what to wish for him but that he may meet with a real Pauline.

Meanwhile he should not attempt to show how a person may be recovered from this morbid state--for he is hardly convalescent, and 'what should we speak of but that which we know?'¹⁹

As a poem about an intense young poet, one who is idealistic and ambitious, Pauline was interpreted by Mill as autobiographical. Mill's assumption was at least partially accurate, for there is much of Browning in the speaker of the poem. Browning shares the speaker's appetite for knowledge and experience. Writing to Elizabeth Barrett some years later, he admits:

. . . I need not be told--and is part & parcel of an older--indeed primitive folly of mine, which I shall never wholly get rid of, of desiring to do nothing when I cannot do all; seeing nothing, getting, enjoying nothing, where there is no seeing & getting & enjoying wholly. . . .²⁰

And in another letter he acknowledges his self-consciousness:

. . . but I know myself--surely--and always have done so--for is there not somewhere the little book I first printed when a boy, with John Mill, the metaphysical head, his marginal note that 'the writer possesses a deeper self-consciousness than I ever knew in a sane human being.' So I never deceived myself much, nor called my feelings for people other than they were: and who has a right to say, if I have not, that I had, but I said that, supernatural or no.²¹

Despite this, Browning was dismayed that Mill had identified him so completely with the speaker of his poem. For Browning had intended Pauline to be dramatic. When Mill's annotated copy of the poem was returned to him, Browning wrote in the front:

The following Poem was written in pursuance of a foolish plan which occupied me mightily for a time, and which had for its object the enabling me to assume & realize I know not how many different characters;--meanwhile the world was never to guess that "Brown, Smith, Jones & Robinson" (as the spelling books have it) the respective authors of this poem, the other novel, such an opera, such a speech, etc. etc. were no other than one and the same individual. The present abortion was the first work of the Poet of the batch, who would have been more legitimately myself than most of the others; but I surrounded him with all manner of (to my then notion) poetical accessories, and had planned quite a delightful life for him.

Only this crab remains of the shapely Tree of Life in this Fool's paradise of mine.--R.B.²²

Browning states his intention again when a new edition of Pauline was published in 1868, with the following introductory note for the volume:

The thing was my earliest attempt at 'poetry always dramatic in principle, and so many utterances of so many imaginary persons, not mine,' which I have since written according to a scheme less extravagant

and scale less impracticable than were ventured upon in this crude preliminary sketch--a sketch that, on reviewal, appears not altogether wide of some hint of the characteristic features of that particular dramatis persona it would fain have reproduced: good draughtsmanship, however, and right handling were far beyond the artist at that time.²³

Mill's reaction showed Browning that his goal had not been realized. Browning's early biographers, Griffin and Minchin, proposed that Mill's criticism had a devastating effect on Browning and occasioned his shift from subjective to objective poetry.²⁴ In recent years, critics have taken exception to this theory.

Certainly a sensitive young poet would have been disturbed by an evaluation such as Mill's, but there is no substantive evidence that Browning was permanently scarred. Browning's principal reponse seems to have been embarrassment at being associated with the speaker of his poem.

Furthermore, it does not seem likely that Mill's criticism redirected the course of Browning's work. For Browning never had meant to write subjective poetry. In Browning's own words, Pauline was "dramatic in principle" but suffered from the fact that "good draughtsmanship . . . and right handling were far beyond the artist at that time." Apparently what Mill's criticism did was to show Browning how his work appeared to others or, at least, to one other. It is true that his poetry becomes more and more oblique as time goes on but presumably because he learned how to accomplish the obliqueness that he had wanted to characterize his poetry from the start. Roma King explains that Browning learned "if he were convincingly to dissociate himself from his personae he had to develop a more skillful manner of writing."²⁵ And Ian Jack agrees that Browning did not alter his purpose but instead sought to alter his method:

Browning was to continue his exploration of the nature of the imaginative life and the role of the creative genius in human society; but before he could do so with any hope of success he had to find a protagonist who differed from himself much more markedly than the poet in Pauline, and so make his escape into that territory of dramatic poetry of which he was soon to become the supreme Victorian master.²⁶

Already Browning was moving away from speaking in his own voice and toward a more dramatic portrayal of character in Paracelsus, his second published poem. Though perhaps autobiographical to a degree, Paracelsus is not as blatantly so as Pauline had been. In the lengthy five-part poem, Browning reveals the character of a historical figure, Paracelsus, the Renaissance physician, by allowing him to speak for himself at five critical times in his intellectual and spiritual development.

Paracelsus, like Pauline, indicates Shelley's influence. As DeVane has shown, because of his passion for knowledge, his unbounded ambition, and his tireless introspection, Paracelsus reminds the reader of Shelley's Prometheus or Alastor. DeVane further contends that Browning may have had Shelley himself in mind when he created the character of Aprile, the poet who longs for infinite love.²⁷

In Paracelsus Browning was still struggling with form. The problem with Paracelsus is, in Jack's words, that "it is far too diffuse. . . ."28 It lacks unity and cohesion. There is insufficient motivation for many of the moods and feelings expressed by Paracelsus.

The passages of natural description in the poem are also characteristic of its general diffusion. Natural description does not figure as significantly in this poem, nor is it as well-integrated with character presentation or theme, as it was in Pauline. Park Honan comments on the

perplexing imagery and on "its almost total irrelevance to character."²⁹

For example, at the beginning of the poem, Paracelsus converses with Michal and Festus, old friends he has not seen for some time. He tries to cheer Michal saying:

Look up, sweet Michal, nor esteem the less
 Your stained and drooping vines their grapes bow down,
 Nor blame those creaking trees bent with their fruit,
 That apple-tree with a rare after-birth
 Of peeping blooms sprinkled its wealth among!
 Then for the winds--what wind that ever raved
 Shall vex that ash which overlooks you both,
 So proud it wears its berries? Ah, at length,
 The old smile meet for her, the lady of this
 Sequestered nest!--this kingdom, limited
 Alone by one old populous green wall
 Tenanted by the ever-busy flies,
 Grey crickets and shy lizards and quick spiders,
 Each family of the silver-threaded moss--
 Which, look through near, this way, and it appears
 A stubble-field or a cane-brake, a marsh
 Of bulrush whitening in the sun: laugh now!
 Fancy the crickets, each one in his house,
 Looking out, wondering at the world--or best,
 Yon painted snail with his gay shell of dew,
 Travelling to see the glossy balls high up
 Hung by the caterpillar, like gold lamps. (ll. 27-48)

This lengthy passage does nothing to advance the narrative or reveal character. It seems to be description merely for the sake of description.

Only occasionally are the natural descriptions clearly relevant. By part three, Paracelsus has become a renowned professor, but he feels himself a failure. He and Festus hear the wind, each one finding reinforcement for his own mood. Paracelsus announces:

'T is the melancholy wind astir
 Within the trees....(III, ll. 997-998)

But to Festus, the sound is soothing and comforting:

The night, late strewn with clouds and flying stars,
 Is blank and motionless: how peaceful sleep
 The tree-tops altogether! Like an asp,
 The wind slips whispering from bough to bough. (III, ll. 1000-1003)

Paracelsus is on his deathbed in the last section of the poem. Festus is by his side and urges him to share his insights. Paracelsus responds by commenting on the wonder of creation, especially the creation of man who gives meaning to the whole:

. . . man, once descried, imprints for ever
 His presence on all lifeless things: the winds
 Are henceforth voices, wailing or a shout,
 A querulous mutter or a quick gay laugh,
 Never a senseless gust now man is born. (V, ll. 719-723)

In other words, Beach explains, "All nature. . . is glorified by the light thrown back by man's imagination on the world in which he lives. As soon as man is born, he begins to interpret nature in terms of his own moods and fancies."³⁰ Throughout his poetry, Browning's characters do just this.

In short, as these passages from Paracelsus show, Browning was already moving away from traditional lyricism and becoming more dramatic. This movement resulted in less extensive use of landscape and natural detail.

For some time, Browning continued to experiment with dramatic form, completing another long, obscure historical poem, Sordello (1840), and a series of unsuccessful plays (1837-1846). But during these same years, Browning was also writing shorter poems which demonstrate his increasing skill. In these poems, published as Dramatic Lyrics (1842) and Dramatic Romances and Lyrics (1845), Browning does use natural detail but sub-

ordinates it to character. Striking scenery may be described, but its purpose is to set a mood or to reinforce character portrayal. A few examples will suffice.

Part one of Pippa Passes (1841) exposes the crime of Ottima and Sebald. Having murdered Ottima's husband, Luca, to prevent any impediment to their illicit passion, Ottima and Sebald find the world somehow changed. Sebald looks out on the morning saying:

It seems to me a night with a sun added.
Where's dew, where's freshness? That bruised plant, I bruised
In getting through the lattice yestereve,
Droops as it did. (I, ll. 32-35)

Ramona Merchant points out that "Nature here takes on the print of their crime. . . ."31

Sebald has misgivings, but his passion for Ottima overshadows them until he overhears the song of the peasant girl, Pippa, whose innocence allows her to see the world in a different light:

The year's at the spring
And day's at the morn;
Morning's at seven;
The hill-side's dew-pearled
The lark's on the wing;
The snail's on the thorn:
God's in his heaven--
All's right with the world! (I, ll. 221-228)

Sebald realizes that because of his sin the world will never seem right to him again, and in a frenzy of remorse, takes his own life.

By contrast, the beauty of darkness enfolds the lovers of "In a Gondola." Out upon the water, it seems to the man that nature sympathizes with his love:

. . . the stars help me, and the sea bears part;
The very night is clinging (ll. 3-4)

The water on which they glide encircles them, forming a private, secure world. Awareness of imminent danger intensifies their love but also prompts thoughts of death. Even so, there is little fear. To the woman, the water seems to offer the opportunity for a gentle passing. She tells her companion:

Dip your arm over the boat-side, elbow-deep,
As I do: thus: were death so unlike sleep,
Caught this way? Death's to fear from flame or steel,
Or poison doubtless: but from water--feel! (ll. 116-119)

Significantly, it is a return to land which brings vengeance and the violent death of the man. Throughout "In a Gondola" the emphasis is on the lovers' emotions, but the water world they float through provides an appropriate setting for a haunting romance.

In "How They Brought the Good News from Ghent to Aix," the natural details are limited to the brief, sharp images perceived by the horseman on his desperate ride to Aix:

'T was moonset at starting; but while we drew near
Lokeren, the cocks crew and twilight dawned clear;
At Boom, a great yellow star came out to see;
At Düffeld, 't was morning as plain as could be;

At Aershot, up leaped of a sudden the sun,
And against him the cattle stood black every one,
To stare thro' the mist at us galloping past. (ll. 13-16; 19-21)

These sparse, but vivid, images increase the pace and heighten the tense, but exultant, mood of the poem.

Similarly, the few lines of natural detail in "The Lost Mistress" are significant. A man reluctantly accepts his mistress's rejection of

his love and agrees that henceforth they will meet merely as friends. He notes, however, that though love has died, life in the natural world goes on as before:

Hark, 't is the sparrows' good-night twitter
About your cottage eaves!

And the leaf-buds on the vine are woolly,
I noticed that, to-day;

One day more bursts them open fully
--You know the red turns grey. (ll. 3-8)

The fertility of the plants contrasts with the sterility of the couple's present relationship.

In poems such as these, Browning had departed from the protracted natural description typical of Romantic lyricism and concentrated on human personalities and relationships. The impulses that Browning indulged in at great length in Pauline were allowed only infrequent and brief expression as the years passed. That those lyrical impulses were still alive can be seen in "Meeting at Night" and "Parting at Morning."

"Meeting at Night" opens with a striking seascape succinctly pictured in a few deft phrases:

The grey sea and the long black land;
And the yellow half-moon large and low;
And the startled little waves that leap
In fiery ringlets from their sleep,
As I gain the cove with pushing prow,
And quench its speed i' the slushy sand. (ll. 1-6)

The natural description is exceptional. The setting is depicted with only a few sharp details. The expanse of sea, the stretch of dark sand, the slice of moon--only three ingredients in the setting, yet each dis-

tinctively colored, each concretely imagined and captured in words, so vividly captured, in fact, that the reader can visualize the entire setting. Lines seven and eight follow the man from the boat to the farmhouse where his love waits:

Then a mile of warm sea-scented beach;
Three fields to cross till a farm appears; (ll. 7-8)

The poem ends as the lovers embrace.

The four-line companion poem, "Parting at Morning," contains two lines of scenery and two of reflection:

Round the cape of a sudden came the sea,
And the sun looked over the mountain's rim:
And straight was a path of gold for him,
And the need of a world of men for me.

Browning himself explained the perplexing last line as the man's "'confession of how fleeting is the belief (implied in the first part) that such raptures are self-sufficient and enduring--as for the time they appear?'"³²

Ian Jack says of "Meeting at Night" and "Parting at Morning:"

These poems are as remarkable for what is left out as for what is included: there is no description of the lady, and virtually none of the lovers' meeting: instead we are given only the briefest natural description and a line or two of reflection by the speaker. It is impossible to imagine a love story told more concisely than in this poem. . . .³³

As these poems demonstrate, while the general movement of Browning's work is toward greater objectivity, he was still capable of lyrical expression. At times he seems to return spontaneously to a Romantic lyricism, as in "Home Thoughts from Abroad."

With the famous lines, "Oh, to be in England/ Now that April's there," he opens his reminiscence of an English springtime. In the first stanza, describing April, the speaker recalls the initial signs of spring--the tentative voice of a single bird, the tender buds dotted along tree limbs. Stanza two describes his memories of May. The birds--whitethroat, swallow, thrush--now sing without restraint and the pear trees and buttercups are in full blossom:

And after April, when May follows,
 And the whitethroat builds, and all the swallows!
 Hark, where my blossomed pear-tree in the hedge
 Leans to the field and scatters on the clover
 Blossoms and dewdrops--at the bent spray's edge--
 That's the wise thrush; he sings each song twice over,
 Lest you should think he never could recapture
 The first fine careless rapture! (ll. 9-16)

The ecstatic song of Browning's thrush recalls that of Keats's nightingale and Shelley's skylark.

In "Home-Thoughts from Abroad," as in much Romantic poetry, natural details are vividly, convincingly rendered and exist to convey the poet's celebratory feeling and to stir that feeling in the reader. As Donald Hair points out, "Home-Thoughts from Abroad" becomes "every Englishman's expression of his love for his country. . . ." ³⁴

In another lyric, "Home-Thoughts from the Sea," Browning again displays his patriotism. According to Griffin and Minchin, the first four lines of this seven-line poem accurately recount what Browning saw from the ship's deck on April 27, 1838 on his first trip to Italy. ³⁵

Nobly, nobly Cape Saint Vincent to the North-west died away;
 Sunset ran, one glorious blood-red, reeking into Cadiz Bay;
 Bluish 'mid the burning water, full in face Trafalgar lay;
 In the dimmest North-east distance dawned Gibraltar grand and gray;
 (ll. 1-4)

The striking colors of the sun setting over Cape St. Vincent evoke images of violence and splendor, suitable for a description of the site of two of Nelson's greatest battles. Thoughts of Nelson's sacrifice for his country and the realization of what his country has given him prompt the speaker to ask "how can I help England?" (l. 5). Nature is once more responsible for stirring the emotions of man.

Browning also works at times with Romantic themes: "The Flight of the Duchess" is a dramatic monologue spoken by the servant of a Duke who tells an unidentified friend of the strange escape of his mistress, thirty years earlier. The Duke, a proud, self-centered man, through an arranged marriage, weds a warm, vibrant young woman. The new Duchess, at first, "active, stirring, all fire--" (l. 174) soon becomes pale and quiet, subdued by the coldness of the Duke and his mother. She loses all will to resist repression.

The Dukedom, the setting of the poem, is fittingly a grim mining district:

Ours is a great wild country:
 If you climb to our castle's top,
 I don't see where your eye can stop;
 For when you've passed the cornfield country,
 Where vineyards leave off, flocks are packed,
 And sheep-range leads to cattle-tract,
 And cattle-tract to open-chase,
 And open-chase to the very base
 Of the mountain where, at a funeral pace,
 Round about, solemn and slow,
 One by one, row after row,
 Up and up the pine-trees go,
 So, like black priests up, and so
 Down the other side again
 To another greater, wilder country,
 That's one vast red drear burnt-up plain,
 Branched through and through with many a vein
 Whence iron's dug, and copper's dealt;
 Look right, look left, look straight before,--

Beneath they mine, above they smelt,
 Copper-ore and iron-ore,
 And forge and furnace mould and melt,
 And so on, more and ever more,
 Till at the last, for a bounding belt,
 Comes the salt sand hoar of the great sea-shore,
 --And the whole is our Duke's country. (ll. 6-31)

The stark setting, the bleakness of the region, corresponds to the Duchess's situation. The Duke is devoid of emotional life, of warmth and tenderness, just as the land is devoid of greenery. The Duchess's life becomes as stagnant as the countryside.

The Duke, raised abroad, is only interested in his desolate homeland because of what he has heard on the continent of its romantic past:

. . . For in Paris they told the elf
 Our rough North land was the Land of Lays,
 The one good thing left in evil days;
 Since the Mid-Age was the Heroic Time,
 And only in wild nooks like ours
 Could you taste of it yet as in its prime,
 And see true castles, with proper towers,
 Young-hearted women, old-minded men.
 And manners now as manners were then. (ll. 103-111)

To revive the splendors of the past, the Duke proposes a grand medieval hunt which he intends the Duchess to join. But, as the speaker points out, she has been too thoroughly subdued, and declines:

Now, my friend, if you had so little religion
 As to catch a hawk, some falcon-lanner,
 And thrust her broad wings like a banner
 Into a coop for a vulgar pigeon;
 And if day by day and week by week
 You cut her claws, and sealed her eyes,
 And clipped her wings, and tied her beak,
 Would it cause you any great surprise
 If, when you decided to give her an airing,
 You found she needed a little preparing? (ll. 268-277)

Irritated by the Duchess's refusal, the Duke instructs an old gypsy to visit his wife, convinced the hag will frighten her sufficiently to punish her for her ingratitude. Instead of frightening the Duchess, however, the gypsy revives her and urges her away from repression to freedom.

In this poem, character portrayal is brief and sketchy, for individuals are not of central importance. As Roma King notes, "The poem is concerned less with the development of a specific soul than with the conditions under which souls develop."³⁶ As the wife of the impervious Duke, the Duchess's role is:

To sit thus, stand thus, see and be seen,
At the proper place in the proper minute,
And die away the life between. (ll. 189-191)

Seen as an adornment, not as an individual, the Duchess loses all motivation for action, all interest in living, until the gypsy restores her.

In "The Flight of the Duchess," while, as noted, there are natural descriptions and metaphors, the Romantic influence manifests itself more through Romantic themes than through Romantic nature imagery. One is the theme of individual freedom, just mentioned. In addition, DeVane explains,

There is that romantic tendency towards escape from over-civilized and over-crowded England . . . there is also, as a corollary, that interest in gypsies, who lived a simpler and freer life. . . . There is also in 'The Flight of the Duchess' a record of the curious fashion that swept English country-life afresh in the early Forties--the desire to re-create antiquity, to follow the sports and the manners of the Middle Ages.³⁷

It is the negative aspects of the civilization from which the Duchess flees. To the Duke, the Duchess is a showpiece, an exhibit, just as the

elaborate medieval hunt is an exhibit--empty pageantry--no more. The aged crone dares the Duchess to escape the artificiality surrounding her and confront real life. It is, therefore, on freedom and individuality that the poem concentrates. The Duchess flees. The speaker does not know where she goes or what becomes of her. But as Roma King says, "What matters is that she goes, not where."³⁸ For the Duchess seizes her good moment; now there is at least the chance for fulfillment.

In still another way the influence of Romanticism can be seen in Browning's work. As stated at the beginning of this chapter, the Romantic poets used extensive natural description in their poetry for the purpose of eliciting a sympathetic emotional response from the reader. The poet's ability to enter imaginatively into the very life of a natural object and to convey his perceptions through his art would, it was believed, kindle a sympathetic reaction in the reader who could then feel at one with nature also. J. Hillis Miller suggests that ". . . Browning's distinctive contribution to romanticism is his extension of the idea of the sympathetic imagination from natural objects to other people."³⁹ Believing in the centrality of man, Browning often enters into the consciousness, the very soul of a character, struggling to understand him and then sharing that understanding of an individual with the reader through the dramatic monologue. He uses this method in a number of poems, including "Fra Lippo Lippi," "My Last Duchess," "Mr. Sludge, the Medium," "Andrea del Sarto," and "Bishop Blougram's Apology."

Like the Romantic poets, Browning loved nature and described it in his poems in minute detail. But the number and length of the nature passages in Browning are not as great as those of the Romantic poets.

Browning's attention is focused steadily on man; nature is secondary. In fact, Browning could not write a nature poem with no people in it, though in "Home-Thoughts, from Abroad" he comes close. Moreover, only in his earliest work does Browning use the subjective, or expressive, voice typical of the Romantics. Park Honan has commented that "The ordeal of Robert Browning's early years was partly a search for form."⁴⁰ Because of the embarrassment occasioned by Pauline, Browning was subsequently to avoid such self-revelation and efface himself by presenting a series of dramatic masks. His work became less lyrical in the traditional sense as he became more accomplished in writing dramatic monologues. The dramatic monologue enabled him to speak indirectly through characters he created. And yet through this "anti-lyric" form,⁴¹ Browning continued to display Romantic influence through his sensitive and sympathetic presentation of human personalities.

ENDNOTES TO CHAPTER IV

¹Browning clearly preferred Byron and Shelley. His admiration for Wordsworth came late in life. According to DeVane, disillusionment caused by Wordsworth's abandonment of his youthful liberalism and his acceptance of a series of government posts, culminating in the laureateship in 1843, prompted Browning to write "The Lost Leader." The poem, published in Dramatic Romances in 1845, attacks Wordsworth as the lost leader of humanity. Browning's disdain is also evidenced by the following statement in an August 22, 1846 letter to Elizabeth Barrett: "I would at any time have gone to Finchley to see a curl of his [Byron's] hair or one of his gloves, I am sure--while Heaven knows that I could not get up enthusiasm enough to cross the room if at the other end of it all Wordsworth, Coleridge & [sic] Southey were condensed into the little China bottle yonder. . . ." Browning did meet Wordsworth on several occasions, and while he never championed the Laureate, he did later express considerable regret for having written "The Lost Leader," a product, in Browning's words, of his "hasty youth." In 1880, Browning became a member of the Wordsworth Society. See William Clyde DeVane, A Browning Handbook (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1935; rev. 1955), pp. 159-162; Thurman L. Hood, ed., Letters of Robert Browning, Collected by Thomas J. Wise (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1933), pp. 166-167; and Elvan Kintner, ed., The Letters of Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett Barrett 1845-1846 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1969), p. 986.

²Myra Reynolds, The Treatment of Nature in English Poetry: Between Pope and Wordsworth (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1909), p. 327.

³Reynolds, p. 327.

⁴W. F. Axton, "Victorian Landscape Painting: A Change in Outlook" in Nature and the Victorian Imagination, eds. U. C. Knoepfelmacher and G. B. Tennyson (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977), p. 286.

⁵DeVane, p. 39.

⁶William Irvine and Park Honan, The Book, the Ring, and the Poet (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1974), p. 33.

⁷Stopford Brooke, The Poetry of Robert Browning (New York: T. Y. Crowell and Company, 1902), p. 94.

⁸Compare to "A Turn and we stand in the heart of things;/ The woods are round us heaped and dim," ll. 36-37 of "By the Fire-Side."

⁹Morse Peckham, "Browning and Romanticism," in Writers and Their Background: Robert Browning, ed. Isobel Armstrong (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1975), p. 65.

¹⁰Ian Jack, Browning's Major Poetry (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973), p. 12.

¹¹DeVane, p. 44.

¹²Jack, p. 17.

¹³DeVane, p. 44.

¹⁴Percy Bysshe Shelley, "Alastor," in The Complete Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley, eds. Roger Ingpen and Walter E. Peck (New York: Gordian Press, 1965), I, 189. All further references to this work appear in the text.

¹⁵Irvine and Honan, p. 40.

¹⁶Masao, Miyoshi, "Mill and 'Pauline': the Myth and Some Facts," Victorian Studies, 9 (December 1965), 154.

¹⁷Irvine and Honan, p. 41.

¹⁸John Stuart Mill, "'Pauline'" in Robert Browning: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Philip Drew (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin Company, 1966), p. 176.

¹⁹Mill, pp. 176-177.

²⁰Kintner, I, pp. 53-54.

²¹Kintner, I, p. 28.

²²DeVane, p. 41.

²³Roma A. King, Jr. The Focusing Artifice: The Poetry of Robert Browning (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1968), p. 10.

²⁴W. Hall Griffin and Harry C. Minchin, The Life of Robert Browning with Notices of his Writings, his Family, and his Friends (Hamden: Archon Books, 1910; rev. 1938; rpt. 1966), pp. 58-60. See also DeVane, Handbook, p. 47.

²⁵King, p. 10.

²⁶Jack, p. 21.

²⁷DeVane, p. 51.

²⁸Jack, p. 39.

²⁹Park Honan, Browning's Characters: A Study in Poetic Technique (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1961), p. 25.

³⁰Joseph Warren Beach, The Concept of Nature in Nineteenth-Century English Poetry (New York: Macmillan Company, 1936), p. 442.

³¹Ramona Merchant, "Pippa's Garden," Studies in Browning and His Circle, 2 (Fall 1974), p. 12.

³²Jack, p. 100, n.

³³Jack, p. 100.

³⁴Donald S. Hair, Browning's Experiments with Genre (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1972), p. 91.

³⁵Griffin and Minchin, p. 127.

³⁶King, p. 80.

³⁷DeVane, p. 176.

³⁸King, p. 82.

³⁹Joseph Hillis Miller, The Disappearance of God: Five Nineteenth-Century Writers (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1963), p. 106.

⁴⁰Honan, p. 7.

⁴¹See Chapter I, p. 10.

CHAPTER V

THE INFLUENCE OF THE GROTESQUE

Robert Browning's father loved art and dabbled in art himself. He preferred the Dutch realists, and of English artists, Hogarth was his favorite.¹ His own drawings were usually grotesque caricatures. In addition, he delighted in writing grotesque verses.² Like his father, Robert was intrigued by the grotesque. As a child, he often produced grotesque sketches when given pencil and paper,³ and, as an adult, used the grotesque extensively in his poetry.

Browning draws on the aesthetic of the grotesque to produce grotesque characters, usually morally or mentally twisted individuals; grotesque situations, bizarre or morbid occurrences; grotesque language, unexpected diction, rhymes, and rhythms; and grotesque settings, devastated, pock-marked landscapes and insect-riddled habitations. And Browning was able to adapt the grotesque to produce different effects: humorous, satirical, horrifying.⁴

The emphasis in this chapter will be on Browning's use of grotesque natural detail. As with Lairessian, picturesque, sublime, and romantic natural detail, Browning uses grotesque natural detail to present characters more vividly. More specifically, the grotesque allows Browning to explore his lifelong interest in the unorthodox, the unconventional, the abnormal--especially in regard to human behavior. John Ruskin wrote to him in 1865 chastising him for exhausting his creative energy in "Mr. Sludge, The Medium" on so unworthy a subject as a deceptive spiritualist.

Ruskin agrees that such a man is disgusting and should be exposed, but not in a poem. Ruskin admonishes Browning to ignore such petty subjects and devote his artistic genius to the treatment of more pressing moral issues. He writes:

I am violently grieved and angered by the abuse of a talent like yours on such a matter, while the passions of the nation are allowed to run riot in war and avarice, without rebuke.⁵

Browning responded:

You are wrong, however, to be angry with my poem; nor do you state the fact of it my way. I don't expose jugglery, but anatomize the mood of the juggler,--all morbidness of the soul is worth the soul's study. . . .⁶

Browning had always been interested in studying the morbidness of the soul, as early poems like "Porphyria's Lover" and "Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister" demonstrate. And Browning persisted in such study in late poems like "Red Cotton Night-Cap Country" and "The Inn Album," even though the general public agreed with Ruskin that such disgusting people and events were not the proper subjects for poetry. But given Browning's fascination with the morbidness of the human soul, and his determination to explore it in his poetry, one can recognize that the grotesque is the appropriate aesthetic category for him to draw from.

The noun "grotesque" came into English in the mid-seventeenth century.⁷ It is derived from the Italian "grottesca" which is in turn from the Italian "grotta" or cave.⁸ The word originally referred to an early Italian ornamental style which was discovered during fifteenth-century excavations.⁹ Wolfgang Kayser, author of The Grotesque in Art and Literature explains that in the Renaissance the word designates:

not only something playfully gay and carelessly fantastic, but also something ominous and sinister in the face of a world totally different from the familiar one--a world in which the realm of inanimate things is no longer separated from those of plants, animals, and human beings, and where the laws of statics, symmetry, and proportion are no longer valid.¹⁰

As this passage suggests, the grotesque in art or literature is identified by the distorted or contorted features of the subject, by the unexpected combination of forms (plant with animal, for instance), by the incredibly extravagant, by the unrestrainedly energetic. A number of Browning's poems are marked by these qualities.

G. K. Chesterton maintains that the grotesque is natural, that Browning was merely following nature when he incorporated grotesque detail in his work. Chesterton contends that "the element of the grotesque in art, like the element of the grotesque in nature, means, in the main, energy, the energy which takes its own forms and goes its own way."¹¹ Clearly, Browning himself, as an artist, is characterized by energy, by a search for his own forms, by an insistence on going his own way. For Browning, the grotesque seems to have fulfilled a number of artistic needs including the need to vent the playful exuberance of his spirit in fantasy or satire ("The Pied Piper" and "Sibrandus Schafnaburgensis") as well as the need to express his persistent fascination with macabre human drama ("Red Cotton Nightcap Country" and "Ivan Ivanovitch").

The grotesque, then, manifests itself in Browning's poetry in a variety of ways. Sometimes Browning employs grotesque rhymes and rhythms to make a satiric comment, as in "Holy-Cross Day" which begins:

Fee, faw, fum! bubble and squeak!
 Blessedest Thursday's the fat of the week.
 Rumble and tumble, sleek and rough,

Stinking and savoury, smug and gruff,
 Take the church-road, for the bell's due chime
 Gives us the summons--'t is sermon-time! (ll. 1-6)

The perverse use of language is befitting a description of the perverse treatment of the Jews who are forced to attend Christian services. The grotesque language continues and is combined with repulsive animal imagery to describe the captive audience:

Higgledy piggledy, packed we lie,
 Rats in a hamper, swine in a sty,
 Wasps in a bottle, frogs in a sieve,
 Worms in a carcase, fleas in a sleeve. (ll. 13-16)

Through his crude exposure of the incongruity between:

' . . . the branding-tool, the bloody whip
 'And the summons to Christian fellowship,-- (ll. 113-114)

Browning's satire succeeds.

In other poems, the characters are grotesque. The monk who is the speaker of "Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister" reveals his grotesque personality when he voices his overwhelming hatred for the gentle, harmless Brother Lawrence.

Mr. Sludge is another grotesque creation. His very name suggests moral as well as physical deformity. In "Mr. Sludge--'The Medium'" the grotesque allows Browning to express his personal disgust for the monologist's occupation--spiritualism. While Elizabeth believed in the abilities of spiritualists, Robert, deeming them callous opportunists, had nothing but contempt for them. In fact, Sludge is modeled after D. D. Home, an American medium whom Elizabeth and Robert met at a séance in 1855.¹²

In the poem, Sludge, a famous spiritualist, has been hired to conduct a séance for a wealthy Mr. Horsefall who wishes to commune with his deceased mother. In the course of the evening, Horsefall realizes that the séance is a hoax and threatens to expose Sludge. The infamous Sludge, alternately ingratiating and insulting, attempts to vindicate himself. He frequently employs natural imagery to do so.

Everything about Sludge is oppressive and parasitical. For instance, he says his "fancies sprout as rank/ As toadstool-clump from melon-bed" (ll. 299-300). The natural detail continues with a succession of grotesque animal images. He tells Horsefall of an Italian cobbler who served the government as a paid spy:

. . . His trade was, throwing thus
His sense out, like an ant-eater's long tongue,
Soft, innocent, warm, moist, impassable,
And when 't was crusted o'er with creatures-slick,
Their juice enriched his palate. 'Could not Sludge!' (ll. 539-543)

Like the cobbler, Sludge has learned to profit by patient, careful listening, by using what he hears to his own advantage. Like the ant-eater, he preys on the vulnerable, the unsuspecting.

Park Honan notes that Sludge "recognizes his lowness."¹³ He is aware that people believe spiritualists to be:

'. . . hysteric, hybrid half-and-halves,
'Equivocal, worthless vermin (ll. 567-568)

Still, people request his services. He voices his contempt for those who employ him by comparing them to a nest of maggots:

. . . the swarm of busy buzzing flies,
 Clouds of coincidence, break egg shell, thrive,
 Breed, multiply, and bring you food enough. (ll. 1064-1066)

In The Grotesque in Art and Literature, Kayser points out that grotesque characters often are "composed of human and animal traits. . . ."14 Throughout the monologue, Sludge describes his own actions in terms of animal behavior. He repeatedly compares himself to lower forms of animal life (ant-eaters and vermin). In fact, he sees the outside world in animal images: Horsefall, a peacock (ll. 155ff); his patrons in general as "busy buzzing flies."

In addition to grotesque language and grotesque characters, Browning also describes grotesque situations. "Red Cotton Nightcap Country" is illustrative. The poem tells the tragic story of Leonce Miranda, a man tormented by his sinful life but unable to renounce it. In a series of desperate attempts to exact proofs that he has received divine forgiveness, he holds his hands in a raging fire until they are consumed by the blaze and ultimately pitches himself from the roof of his estate to a ghastly death on the pavement below.

"Ivan Ivanovitch" also recounts a grotesque experience. A village on the edge of a deep Russian forest provides a suitable setting for a macabre tale of terror. The tale opens with a description of the seemingly endless black depths of the forest: an "unprobed undreamed abyss" (l. 31). Through the forest during the night a village woman comes with her three children. When their horse-drawn sledge is pursued by wolves, the terrified mother throws her children, one by one, to the ravenous beasts in an effort to save herself. But the horror does not end here. When she reaches the village, she tells the townspeople that the children

were snatched from her arms by the wolves, that she tried valiantly, but unsuccessfully, to save them. Ivan Ivanovitch, the village carpenter, readily perceives her guilt and taking responsibility for seeing that justice is served, raises his ax over the prostrate mother and severs her head from her shoulders. His neighbors are appalled, but the village priest condones his action. According to Roma King, the priest recognizes that "Ivan, by taking what the mother should have given, her life, restores human dignity and decency."¹⁵

Browning creates a foreboding atmosphere early in the poem. As the mother and children enter the forest:

Out came the moon: my twist soon dwindled, feebly red
 In that unnatural day--yes, daylight, bred between
 Moon-light and snow-light, lamped those grotto-depths. . . .
 (ll. 112-114)

Soon, the wolves appear behind them. At first, the only visible sign of the pursuers is their chilling eyes of "green-glowing brass" which penetrate the darkness. But the wolves rapidly overtake the sledge. The mother remembers the leader:

. . . How he lolls out the length of his tongue,
 How he laughs and lets gleam his white teeth! (ll. 133-134)

The use of the grotesque to inspire fear or terror is generally acknowledged.¹⁶ In its stress on the most revolting details of the violent deaths--the wolves tearing the children's bodies and picking their bones, the guilty mother's headless corpse--"Ivan Ivanovitch" is the epitome of grotesque horror.

Of course, for the purpose of this study, Browning's use of grotesque natural detail is of more interest than his grotesque language,

characters, or situations. But, as we have seen with the animal imagery in "Holy-Cross Day" and "Mr. Sludge, 'The Medium'" and the setting in "Ivan Ivanovitch," grotesque natural detail frequently works in conjunction with other grotesque elements to produce a unified whole. A detailed examination of several more poems will reinforce this generalization.

The grotesque serves to create atmosphere in "Mesmerism." "Mesmerism" is a poem about a spiritualist's attempts to transport his absent lover to his side through the concentrated power of his will. In this poem, the grotesque establishes an appropriately eerie mood for the experience, a mood consistent with the speaker's excited state of mind:

If at night, when doors are shut,
 And the wood-worm picks
 And the death-watch ticks,
 And the bar has a flag of smut,
 And a cat's in the water-but--

And the socket floats and flares,
 And the house-beams groan,
 And a foot unknown
 Is surmised on the garret-stairs,
 And the locks slip unawares--

And the spider, to serve his ends,
 By a sudden thread,
 Arms and legs outspread,
 On the table's midst descends,
 Comes to find, God knows what friends!-- (ll. 6-20)

Into this nocturnal world--the domain of the wood-worm, the cat, and the spider--an unexpected visitor comes, the woman, answering the mental summons of her lover.

The man imagines her approach. Drawn by him, the woman moves:

Out of doors into the night!
 On to the maze
 Of the wild wood-ways,

Not turning to left nor right
From the pathway, blind with sight--

Making thro' rain and wind
O'er the broken shrubs,
'Twixt the stems and stubs,
With a still, composed, strong mind,
Nor a care for the world behind-- (ll. 81-90)

The stormy night and the tangled thicket through which the woman passes add to the ominous tone and help the reader to visualize her hypnotic approach.

Since Browning did not believe in spiritualism, it is unlikely that he is suggesting that the woman actually does come. DeVane feels Browning is writing about "the intuitive knowledge of each other's minds which is given to lovers."¹⁷ However, Ian Jack, pointing to the rushing movement of the verse, contends that "the speaker . . . is clearly deranged . . . his mesmeric powers are in fact a pure delusion."¹⁸ In any event, the grotesque natural detail establishes the tone of suspense and mystery appropriate for this strange rendezvous (or imaginary rendezvous) of separated lovers.

The grotesque also establishes a fitting tone for "Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came." In the words of Wolfgang Kayser, "the grotesque is the estranged world;" it is not an imaginary fantasy land but our own familiar world transformed.¹⁹ Such is the world through which Childe Roland travels. His world is our own world, wasted and blighted, a distortion of the world as we know it. The ugly, repulsive details of the landscape render a horrible, grotesque mental image. From the "hoary cripple, with malicious eye" to the "stiff blind horse," Roland encounters one abhorrent feature after another. He is thoroughly shaken by the desolate terrain he traverses. As he crosses a "sudden little river" (l. 109), he imagines

that he treads "upon a dead man's cheek" (l. 122). He longs to reach the other side, but when he does, to his dismay, he finds the country just as bleak. He is left to wonder:

Who were the strugglers, what war did they wage,
Whose savage trample thus could pad the dank
Soil to a plash? Toads in a poisoned tank,
Or wild cats in a red-hot iron cage--

The fight must so have seemed in that fell cirque. (ll. 129-133)

The entire landscape is tortured and diseased:

Now blotches rankling, coloured gay and grim,
Now patches where some leanness of the soil's
Broke into moss or substances like boils;
Then came some palsied oak, a cleft in him
Like a distorted mouth that splits its rim
Gaping at death, and dies while it recoils. (ll. 151-156)

In chapter two, "Childe Roland" is discussed as an illustration of Browning's creation of repellent landscapes according to the formula for the ugly prescribed by the artist Gerard de Lairese. According to Lily Bess Campbell, "the grotesque is . . . a partial expression of the ugly."²⁰ More specifically, when an artist or a writer "attempts to portray the incomprehensible" beyond the ugly, the grotesque is the result.²¹ In "Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came," Browning does convey an incomprehensibility beyond surface ugliness. Roland's quest is an unfathomable experience, a grotesque nightmare.

At times, instead of producing a mood of mystery or horror, Browning employs the grotesque to invoke a comic mood. In May of 1842, the son of Browning's friend, the actor William Macready, was ill and confined to bed. To amuse the child, Browning wrote two poems for him to illustrate:

"The Cardinal and the Dog" and "The Pied Piper," the latter having since become a children's classic. Browning's version of the old legend of a town besieged by rats is characterized by a delightful grotesqueness, beginning in the second stanza with the description of the presumptuous rodents:

Rats!
 They fought the dogs and killed the cats,
 And bit the babies in the cradles,
 And ate the cheeses out of the vats,
 And licked the soup from the cooks' own ladles,
 Split open the kegs of salted sprats,
 Made nests inside men's Sunday hats,
 And even spoiled the women's chats
 By drowning their speaking
 With shrieking and squeaking
 In fifty different sharps and flats. (ll. 10-20)

Pressured by the townspeople to get rid of the rats, the officials of the city are relieved when a man appears who claims he can solve their dilemma. The officials are awed by the comic grotesqueness of the tall, slender man decked in a coat of yellow and red. They nevertheless agree, out of desperation, to pay him one thousand guilders if he can solve the town's dilemma.

With that, the Piper steps into the street and begins to play:

And out of the houses the rats came tumbling.
 Great rats, small rats, lean rats, brawny rats,
 Brown rats, black rats, grey rats, tawny rats,
 Grave old plodders, gay young friskers,
 Fathers, mothers, uncles, cousins,
 Cocking tails and pricking whiskers,
 Families by tens and dozens,
 Brothers, sisters, husbands, wives--
 Followed the Piper for their lives. (ll. 110-118)

The rats are lured into the river and drown--all but one that manages to swim to the opposite shore where he publicizes the fantastic story.

Once the town is relieved of the pests, the officials renege on payment of the promised reward. In retaliation, the Piper once more begins to play, this time summoning the children through an opening in the mountainside to an enchanted fairy world:

'Where waters gushed and fruit-trees grew
 'And flowers put forth a fairer hue,
 'And everything was strange and new;
 'The sparrows were brighter than peacocks here,
 'And their dogs outran our fallow deer,
 'And honey-bees had lost their stings,
 'And horses were born with eagles' wings: (ll. 242-248)

The beauty of this world contrasts sharply with the grotesqueness of the rat-infested city detailed earlier in the poem. In this poem there is grotesqueness of setting, of situation, and of character. For the contrasts within the personality of the Piper himself are as striking as those in the scenery. Lily Campbell notes, "The Piper, with his humorous, and yet fear-inspiring character, is certainly fancifully grotesque."²²

Other poems, notably "Sibrandus Schafnaburgensis" and "Caliban Upon Setebos" contain even more pronounced natural grotesqueness, largely because of the abundant use of grotesque animals and insects. Wolfgang Kayser claims, "Certain animals are especially suitable to the grotesque--snakes, owls, toads, spiders--the nocturnal and creeping animals which inhabit realms apart from and inaccessible to man."²³ Browning is particularly fond of such creatures. Throughout his life, he kept a menagerie of unusual pets: an owl, geese, even an alligator.²⁴

Moreover, Browning never outgrew his boyhood fondness for insects. He appended the following passage to an 1842 note to Richard Horne, Fox's successor as editor of the Monthly Repository:

A picturesque bit of ghaſtlineſſ: in this little writing-room of mine are two ſculls, each on its bracket by the window; few brooms trouble walls and ceiling, you may be ſure--ſo here has a huge field-spider woven his platform-web from the under-jaw of one of theſe ſculls to the window ſill--and, (the two ſole remaining teeth keeping the jaws juſt enough apart) the ſpider's ſelf is on the watch, with each great arm wide out in a tooth-ſocket--thus.²⁵

Browning's deſcription of his "roommate" is followed by a drawing of the ſpider in his new home.

Writing to Elizabeth Barrett in January, 1846, he confeſſed:

I ſuſpect . . . you have found out by this time my odd liking for 'vermin'--you once wrote 'your ſnails'--and certainly ſnails are old clients of mine. . . . What a fine fellow our Engliſh water-eft is I always loved all thoſe wild creatures God 'ſets up for themſelves' ſo independently of us, ſo ſuſſeſſfully, with their ſtrange happy minute inch of a candle, as it were, to light them; while we run about and againſt each other with our great creſſets and fire-pots. . . .²⁶

In many of his poems Browning diſplays his fascination with beetles, ſnails, ſpiders, and toads. In fact, he makes theſe creatures the heroes of "Garden Fancies II: Sibrandus Schafnaburgeniſis." The ſpeaker of the poem, irritated by the incredible dullneſſ of a book he has taken to the garden to read, throws the offeſſive volume into the hollow of an old tree and turns his attention to bread, cheese and wine and "a jolly chapter of Rabelais" (l. 80). A month later he pulls the book out again and aſſeſſes the damage--the yellowed pages, the ſmeared ink, the bliſtered leather cover. He relishes the thought of what the book muſt have endured:

How did he like it when the live creatures
 Tickled and toused and browsed him all over,
 And worm, slug, eft, with serious features,
 Came in, each one, for his right of trover?
 --When the water-beetle with great blind deaf face
 Made of her eggs the stately deposit,
 And the newt borrowed just so much of the preface
 As tiled in the top of his black wife's closet?

All that life and fun and romping,
 All that frisking and twisting and coupling,
 While slowly our poor friend's leaves were swamping
 And clasps were cracking and covers suppling! (ll. 97-108)

Browning uses grotesque natural detail to underscore his satirical contrast between the deadly tome and the thriving insect world. Elizabeth Barrett expressed her delight with the grotesque descriptions in a letter of July, 1845: ". . . I like your burial of the pedant so much!--you have quite the damp smell of funguses and the sense of creeping things through and through it."²⁷

But in no other poem does Browning more vividly explore the wonder of crawling, squirming, oozing life than in "Caliban Upon Setebos." From the opening scene of Caliban "Flat on his belly in the pit's much mire" (l. 2), the reader perceives that Caliban's world is an animal world. Park Honan has counted "sixty-three references to animals in 295 lines."²⁸ Nathaniel Hart explains how pervasive the animal imagery is. First, Caliban literally lives with animals. Lying in the pit, he:

. . . feels about his spine small eft-things course,
 Run in and out each arm, and make him laugh: (ll. 5-6)

All around him are animals:

Trees and the fowls here, beast and creeping thing.
 Yon otter, sleek-wet, black, lithe as a leech;

Yon auk, one fire-eye in a ball of foam,
 That floats and feeds; a certain badger brown
 He hath watched hunt with that slant white-wedge eye
 By moonlight; and the pie with the long tongue
 That pricks deep into oakwarts for a worm, (ll. 45-51)

"Secondly," Hart continues, "Caliban is in the habit of describing phenomena in animal terms."³⁰ He views the sunset in such terms:

He looks out o'er yon sea which sunbeams cross
 And recross till they weave a spider-web
 (Meshes of fire, some great fish breaks at times) (ll. 12-14)

"Third, Caliban's principal method of reasoning is by analogy, and the analogical experiences by which he attempts to arrive at god invariably involve the behavior of animals on the lowest order. . . ." ³¹

Imitating what he perceives as an unpredictable, arbitrary divine dispensation of reward and punishment, Caliban capriciously exercises his power over the island creatures:

'Am strong myself compared to yonder crabs
 That march now from the mountain to the sea;
 'Let twenty pass, and stone the twenty-first,
 Loving not, hating not, just choosing so.
 'Say, the first straggler that boasts purple spots
 Shall join the file, one pincer twisted off;
 'Say this bruised fellow shall receive a worm,
 And two worms he whose nippers end in red;
 As it likes me each time, I do: so He. (ll. 100-108)

Throughout the poem, Caliban tries to understand the nature of his god, Setebos. John Howard states in his essay "Caliban's Mind" that in the poem ". . . Browning endeavoured [sic] to capture the limitations of the subhuman mind when confronted with religious speculation."³² Additional support for this reading comes from DeVane who claims that Browning shared many of the beliefs of the American Unitarian minister, Theodore Parker,

whom he met in December of 1859. Parker theorized that throughout history men have developed a theology commensurate with their ability to conceive of God. In other words, he postulated the need throughout history "for humanizing the deity."³³ Caliban can only conceive of Setebos in terms of himself or the animal life which surrounds him. Setebos is an animal god, a grotesque god who delights in exercising his power to torture defenseless creatures. At the end of the poem, Caliban spots a raven that he believes to be a spy for Setebos. His suspicions are confirmed when a thunder storm strikes, supposedly the manifestation of Setebos' wrath.

Grotesqueness pervades the poem. The poem presents Caliban's perspective, and from his perspective, we recognize him as a grotesque character living in a grotesque world ruled by a grotesque god. Like Childe Roland's, Caliban's environment is incomprehensible to him.

We have seen in Browning the comic grotesque, the satiric grotesque, and the grotesque of terror. Even within an aesthetic type, Browning experimented, adapting that type to fulfill a wide range of poetic possibilities. Yet Browning's primary purpose of revealing the human soul remains unchanged. In most instances, the grotesque exists to expose the true nature of a character (Caliban, Mr. Sludge, Leonce Miranda, the village woman in "Ivan Ivanovitch") or a character's state of mind at a given time (Childe Roland and the spiritualist in "Mesmerism"). In "Sibrandus Schafnaburgensis" and "The Pied Piper," grotesqueness of character is presented more indirectly, but is nevertheless present. The Pied Piper's physical appearance is grotesque, but it is the convenient morality of the townspeople which is more grotesque. And for Browning, in "Sibrandus," the abuse which the discarded book endures in

the hollow of the tree is not as grotesque as he assumes the writer of such an incredibly dull book to be. Throughout the poem, the existence of that pompous pedant is ever in the reader's mind. He and his book are one and the same. Therefore, when the reader learns of the sufferings of the book, he imagines the man himself suffering just so.

The whole spirit of the grotesque is appropriate for Browning. The very essence of the grotesque is unlikely combinations--of animals with plants, of the supernatural with the natural. And Browning was intrigued by unlikely pairings. From childhood on, he was fascinated by the uncommon, the unusual. Furthermore, Browning was given to experimentation, and, in its emphasis on the unlikely and the unexpected, the grotesque invites experimentation. In fact, William Raymond defines the grotesque as "a bold and peremptory shattering of conventional moulds."³⁴ Use of the grotesque allows Browning to explore a new range of options, to create a broad spectrum of effects. More specifically, as this chapter has shown, grotesque natural detail aids him in producing some of these desired effects.

ENDNOTES TO CHAPTER V

¹William Clyde DeVane, A Browning Handbook (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1935; rev. 1955), p. 3.

²Browning's father wrote his own poetic version of the legend of the Pied Piper. He started his poem in 1842, but stopped when he learned his son was writing a poem on the subject. He did later finish his poem. See DeVane, Handbook, p. 130.

³W. Hall Griffin and Harry C. Minchin, The Life of Robert Browning with Notices of his Writings, his Family, and his Friends (1910; rev. 1938; rpt. Hamden: Archon Books, 1966), p. 12.

⁴Walter Bagehot was one of the earliest to label Browning a master of the grotesque. See Walter Bagehot, "Wordsworth, Tennyson, and Browning; or, Pure, Ornate, and Grotesque Art in Poetry," in Vol. II of Literary Studies (1879; rpt. London: Longmans, Green, and Company, 1973), pp. 338-390.

⁵David DeLaura, "Ruskin and the Brownings: Twenty-five Unpublished Letters," Bulletin of the John Rylands Library, 54 (1971), 348.

⁶DeLaura, p. 349.

⁷Lily Bess Campbell, "The Grotesque in the Poetry of Robert Browning," Bulletin of the University of Texas, No. 92, Humanistic Series, No. 5 (April 1, 1907), 3-41; rpt. in Collected Papers of Lily B. Campbell: First Published in Various Journals, 1907-1952, Introd. Louis B. Wright (New York: Russell and Russell, 1968), p. 5.

⁸Wolfgang Kayser, The Grotesque in Art and Literature, trans. Ulrich Weisstein (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1963), p. 19.

⁹Kayser, p. 19.

¹⁰Kayser, p. 21.

¹¹G. K. Chesterton, Robert Browning (London: Macmillan and Company, 1926), p. 149.

¹²DeVane, p. 307.

¹³Park Honan, Browning's Characters: A Study in Poetic Technique (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1961), p. 177.

¹⁴Kayser, p. 105.

- ¹⁵Roma A. King, Jr., The Focusing Artifice: The Poetry of Robert Browning (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1968), p. 221.
- ¹⁶Kayser, p. 31.
- ¹⁷DeVane, p. 226.
- ¹⁸Ian Jack, Browning's Major Poetry (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973), pp. 160-161.
- ¹⁹Kayser, p. 184.
- ²⁰Campbell, p. 10.
- ²¹Campbell, p. 14.
- ²²Campbell, p. 28.
- ²³Kayser, p. 182.
- ²⁴Thurman L. Hood, ed., Letters of Robert Browning Collected by Thomas J. Wise (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1933), p. 289.
- ²⁵Hood, p. 8.
- ²⁶Elvan Kintner, ed. The Letters of Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett Barrett, 1845-1846 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1969), I, 356-357.
- ²⁷Kintner, I, 130-131.
- ²⁸Honan, p. 172.
- ²⁹Nathaniel I. Hart, "The Nature of the Grotesque in Robert Browning's Poetry," Diss. University of Minnesota 1968, p. 203.
- ³⁰Hart, p. 203.
- ³¹Hart, p. 203.
- ³²John Howard, "Caliban's Mind," in Robert Browning: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Philip Drew (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin Company, 1966), p. 224.
- ³³DeVane, p. 299.
- ³⁴William O. Raymond, "The Infinite Moment," in "The Infinite Moment" and Other Essays in Robert Browning, 2nd ed. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1965), p. 16.

CHAPTER VI
THE INFLUENCE OF BROWNING'S CONTEMPORARIES

It remains for us to ascertain the extent to which Browning's contemporaries influenced his use of natural detail. Although Browning always found the past intriguing, he was very much a man of the present. He relished curious bits of ancient lore, but he did not ignore nineteenth-century authors and artists. It has been pointed out that he admired the works of the second-generation Romantic poets--Byron, Keats, and especially Shelley. Moreover, he was familiar with the literary efforts of his peers. He saw Alfred Tennyson quite often at social functions and was present at a private reading of Maud. While they did not know each other well, it was Browning who urged Matthew Arnold to include his dramatic narrative "Empedocles Upon Etna" in his collected works, overruling Arnold's reluctance to print a poem so dismal in its theme. That Browning knew his contemporaries--socialized with them, occasionally corresponded with them, read their works--is clear, but the extent to which he was influenced by them is not so apparent. In fact, what is most readily apparent are the ways in which Browning's work differs from that of other great Victorian poets.

For instance, in his persistent emphasis on individuals Browning is unlike his contemporaries. It is not that others did not write narrative or dramatic poetry. Both Tennyson and Arnold wrote numerous narrative poems (as did the Pre-Raphaelite poets). Moreover, Tennyson was in his own way as accomplished with the dramatic monologue form as Browning,

and Arnold sometimes used it. But these other two Victorian masters differed from Browning in their purposes and in their more extensive use of nature. And even when Browning seems to be using techniques similar to theirs, it is not evident that this is a result of their influencing him. It is more likely a result of his ceaseless experimentation. In the course of experimentation, Browning would inevitably try some of the methods and motifs that other Victorians used.

The works of Browning and Arnold are very different. In Matthew Arnold's poetry, nature is often used to sustain the melancholy tone of the whole. Margaret Drabble, in A Writer's Britain: Landscape in Literature, notes that Arnold's landscapes are nostalgic, full of "a memory of a golden age."¹ His characters (consider Empedocles, the narrator of "Thyrsis," the Scholar Gypsy) are, in the words of E. D. H. Johnson, "invariably lonely and isolated figures, alien to their environment."² According to Johnson, nature is entirely apart from man in Arnold's poetry. This is not always the case in Browning. Man is very much in harmony with his natural surroundings in "By the Fire-Side," "De Gustibus--," and "Home Thoughts from Abroad." More importantly, the tone of Browning's work differs from that of Arnold's. Browning's poems are seldom melancholy. When man is out of harmony with his surroundings in Browning's work, as he is in "Two in the Campagna" or "A Lover's Quarrel," it is because of the individual's unwillingness or inability to harmonize, not because of some defect in the universe or in human social arrangements.

Furthermore, there is not the same sense of spiritual loss in Browning as in Arnold. Arnold's inability to accept orthodox Christianity contributes to his feeling of isolation. For Arnold, and Tennyson as

well, modern science was disturbing. In fact, for many Victorians, as J. Hillis Miller has shown in The Disappearance of God, God is "out of reach."³ This is not so for Browning. His knowledge of modern science did not destroy his belief in God. Writing in 1881 to Dr. F. J. Furnivall, who established the Browning Society, Browning says in support of Darwin's theories, "how can one look at Nature as a whole and doubt that, wherever there is a gap, a 'link' must be 'missing'--through the limited power and opportunity of the looker?" Still this does not obviate belief in God. Browning continues, "Once set the balls rolling, and ball may hit ball and send any number in any direction over the table; but I believe in the cue pushed by a hand."⁴ Unlike many of his contemporaries, then, Browning does believe that God exists and can be found, can be reached. Miller maintains that Browning attempts to reach him by "making a complete inventory of God's creatures, plunging into their inner lives one by one and wresting their secrets."⁵ Browning's faith helps explain his persistent optimism and his sensitive treatment of the wonders of nature. Captivated by the energy he witnessed, determined to expose the "souls" of living creatures, Browning is much more apt to celebrate natural vitality than to wistfully long for an idyllic retreat from the problems of society.

There are also marked differences between Browning and Tennyson. Tennyson sometimes describes natural beauty for its own sake and frequently imagines detailed landscapes in which to set his dramatic and narrative poems. Tennyson was especially intent on creating the atmosphere appropriate for a character's state of mind or situation. Nature, for instance, provides the gloom of "Mariana" and the luxuriant dreaminess

of "The Lotus-Eaters." Ian Jack explains, "With Tennyson the mood or the story comes first, and remains predominant, the element of characterization usually being subordinate. With Browning it is quite different."⁶ As Jack observes, in Tennyson's poetry, mood and plot rank first in order of importance; character is secondary. But for Browning, the opposite is true: character is of utmost importance; mood and plot are important only in so far as they can aid in character revelation. Browning himself, in response to Tennyson's The Holy Grail and Other Poems, expressed the difference thus:

We [Browning and Tennyson] look at the object of art in poetry so differently! Here is an Idyll about a knight being untrue to his friend and yielding to the temptation of that friend's mistress after having engaged to assist him in his suit. I should judge the conflict in the knight's soul the proper subject to describe: Tennyson thinks he should describe the castle, and effect of the moon on its towers, and anything but the soul.⁷

Browning and Tennyson both use natural detail as a means to an end, but for each the end is different. Tennyson wants the reader to share the character's mood--to feel the dreary monotony of Mariana's life and the sensuous indulgence of the Lotus Eaters. But Browning wants the reader to see the character's soul.

To achieve these effects, Browning and Tennyson use nature in distinctive ways. Throughout Tennyson's work, nature reflects human moods. Margaret Drabble points out that in In Memoriam, "The poet's mood colours the landscape. . . . even his descriptions of the beauties of spring and renewal are softened by alliteration into a dreamy melancholy. . . ."⁸ And in other poems, such as "Break, Break, Break," and "The Lady of Shalott," the character's mood is also pictured in the outside world.

This is likewise the case in some of Browning's poems. Dusk is falling as Andrea del Sarto sits by his window reflecting on a life of failure. The blank gray evening corresponds to the dull grayness of his existence. In the fading of the day and the coming of autumn, Andrea sees the image of his life:

. . . days decrease,
 And autumn grows, autumn in everything.
 Eh? The whole seems to fall into a shape
 As if I saw alike my work and self
 And all that I was born to be and do,
 A twilight-piece. (ll. 44-49)

W. C. DeVane notes the "perfect blending of scenery and mood" in another poem, "A Serenade at the Villa."⁹ In this poem a rejected lover comes at night to the home of his mistress. He tries once more to woo her with his songs, but to no avail. Not only is the house dark and closed against him but the natural world is also dark and deadly still:

That was I, you heard last night,
 When there rose no moon at all,
 Nor, to pierce the strained and tight
 Tent of heaven, a planet small:
 Life was dead and so was light. (ll. 1-5)

Not only the woman, but the insects and birds, reject him:

Not a twinkle from the fly,
 Not a glimmer from the worm;
 When the crickets stopped their cry,
 When the owls forebore a term, (ll. 6-9)

The scene, as DeVane has pointed out is "the garden of an Italian villa, on a hot, close southern night before a storm."¹⁰ The storm comes in the third stanza:

Earth turned in her sleep with pain,
 Sultrily suspired for proof:
 In at heaven and out again,
 Lightning!--where it broke the roof,
 Bloodlike, some few drops of rain. (ll. 11-15)

The man persists, leaving only with the coming of day. As the closing lines indicate, the house remains dark. Nature and even the garden gate seem to have resented his intrusion:

Oh how dark your villa was,
 Windows fast and obdurate!
 How the garden grudged me grass
 Where I stood--the iron gate
 Ground its teeth to let me pass! (ll. 56-60)

But often, in Browning, nature provides an ironic contrast. "Two in the Campagna" is illustrative. In this poem, a barrier exists between the lovers who, consequently, never achieve their "good moment" even though all around them plant and animal life is celebrating, exulting, thriving--in essence, providing a model for them.

External nature also provides a contrast to human characters in "A Lovers' Quarrel." The man reminisces about his relationship with his mistress before they quarreled:

When we lived blocked-up with snow,--
 When the wind would edge
 In and in his wedge,
 In, as far as the point would go--
 Not to our ingle, though,
 Where we loved each the other so! (ll. 16-21)

Through the bitter months of winter, the man and woman share an intense love:

When the mesmerizer Snow
 With his hand's first sweep
 Put the earth to sleep:
 'T was a time when the heart could show
 All (ll. 72-76)

But one evening they quarrel. Their relationship changes; they feel close no longer. Ironically, then, while the outside world lies barren and frozen, the relationship between the lovers thrives. But with the coming of spring, though the natural world is reborn, the man and woman remain estranged. The man perceives the changes in nature but can take no delight in them:

Oh, what a dawn of day!
 How the March sun feels like May!
 All is blue again
 After last night's rain,
 And the South dries the hawthorn-spray.
 Only, my Love's away!
 I'd as lief that the blue were grey. (ll. 1-7)

The man's loneliness and dejection contrast sharply with the vitality in the external world:

Runnels, which rillelets swell,
 Must be dancing down the dell,
 With a foaming head
 On the beryl bed (ll. 8-11)

All of nature has come to life:

Fancy the Pampas' sheen!
 Miles and miles of gold and green
 Where the sunflowers blow
 In a solid glow,
 And--to break now and then the screen--
 Black neck and eyeballs keen,
 Up a wild horse leaps between! (ll. 36-42)

But love has died. One quarrel has cancelled out months of tender affection and replaced it with cold disregard. Now even the coming of spring cannot thaw the chill in his mistress's heart. The man longs for the return of the cold of winter when he hopes to be again warmed by love.

Browning differs from Tennyson primarily in the extent to which he employs natural detail. Whereas Tennyson uses nature throughout a poem to create an atmosphere or to sustain a carefully constructed mood, Browning usually establishes a setting by describing a few distinct features of it, and then he turns his attention to character. William Raymond notes:

In his portrayal of Nature, Browning is more apt to dwell on the clear, definite outline of each separate feature in the scene he is describing than to subordinate these to the symmetry and harmony of the landscape as a whole.¹¹

By contrast, Tennyson creates the impression of a full landscape. That landscape, in its mood, seems to both sympathize with and encourage a similar mood in the character.

Perhaps in "James Lee's Wife," Browning comes closer to a Tennysonian evocation of mood than he does in any other poem. W. C. DeVane has compared the poem to Tennyson's work saying, "Browning's poem, like Tennyson's Maud, is a lyrical monodrama, the mood taking the place of characters."¹²

"James Lee's Wife" records a woman's growing awareness that she has lost her husband's love. The subject of the poem is change. All aspects of life, from physical nature to human relationships are shown as changeable. The first stanza of the poem establishes the mood for the whole:

Ah, Love, but a day
And the world has changed!
The sun's away,
And the bird estranged;

The wind has dropped,
 And the sky's deranged:
 Summer has stopped. (ll. 1-7)

Summer has ended. Winter approaches. The change of seasons prompts the woman to ask her husband "Wilt thou change too?" (l. 9)

Her uneasiness is reflected in her gloomy thoughts of the wood which is cast up on the beach from wrecked ships, wood which she gathers and uses to kindle the fire. She thinks of the sailors far from shore who may catch an envious glimpse of the lights of the house and concludes:

Well, poor sailors took their chance;
 I take mine. (ll. 28-29)

The landscape around the cottage mirrors the woman's mood of increasing loneliness, emptiness:

The swallow has set her six young on the rail,
 And looks sea-ward:
 The water's in stripes like a snake, olive-pale
 To the leeward,--
 On the weather-side, black, spotted white with the wind.
 'Good fortune departs, and disaster's behind.'--
 Hark, the wind with its wants and its infinite wail!

Our fig-tree, that leaned for the saltness, has furled
 Her five fingers,
 Each leaf like a hand opened wide to the world
 Where there lingers
 No glint of the gold, Summer sent for her sake:
 How the vines writhe in rows, each impaled on its stake!
 My heart shrivels up and my spirit shrinks curled. (ll. 54-67)

She tries to convince herself that she and her husband ". . . have love, house enough,/ With the field there," (ll. 68-69). But she feels disquieted. She wonders why winter in nature is contagious, why there exists a corresponding winter coldness in her spirit:

But why must cold spread? but wherefore bring change
To the spirit, (ll. 75-76)

In part four of the poem, James Lee's wife tries to understand what has happened to her relationship with her husband. She has perceived his faults all along but loved him despite them:

The man was my whole world, all the same,
With his flowers to praise or his weeds to blame,
And, either or both, to love. (ll. 109-111)

Yet her very devotion has pushed her husband away:

Yet this turns now to a fault--there! there!
That I do love, watch too long,
And wait too well, and weary and wear; (ll. 112-114)

The barrenness of the woman's surroundings matches the emptiness she is feeling:

I leaned on the turf,
I looked at a rock
Left dry by the surf;
For the turf, to call it grass were to mock:
Dead to the roots, so deep was done
The work of the summer sun.

And the rock lay flat
As an anvil's face:
No iron like that!
Baked dry; of a weed, of a shell, no trace:
Sunshine outside, but ice at the core,
Death's altar by the lone shore. (ll. 122-133)

On another occasion, the wind seems to echo her sentiments. She listens to its mournful call, thinking ". . . . I know not any tone/ 'So fit as thine to falter forth a sorrow:" (ll. 162-163).

She gradually accepts the inevitability of change: "Nothing endures: the wind moans, saying so;" (l. 223). Despite her sorrow, life goes on--some days better than others. She seems to take her mood from her surroundings. Sitting on the rocks on a sunny day, she feels almost lighthearted:

Oh, good gigantic smile o' the brown old earth,
 This autumn morning! How he sets his bones
 To bask i' the sun, and thrusts out knees and feet
 For the ripple to run over in its mirth;
 Listening the while, where on the heap of stones
 The white breast of the sea-lark twitters sweet. (ll. 232-237)

But the feeling does not last. Finally, aware that all love is dead in her husband, she resolves:

There is nothing to remember in me,
 Nothing I ever said with a grace,
 Nothing I did that you care to see,
 Nothing I was that deserves a place
 In your mind, now I leave you, set you free. (ll. 333-337)

Natural detail figures heavily in this poem. Browning used as the setting for the work the French coastline. He was there in the village of Ste. Marie, Pornic in August of 1862 and described the spot in a letter to Isa Blagden as

. . . a wild little place in Brittany something like that village where we stayed last year--close to the sea--a hamlet of a dozen houses, perfectly lonely--one may walk on the edge of the low rocks by the sea for miles--or go into the country at the back The place is much to my mind; I have brought books and write.

He goes on to say:

If I could, I would stay just as I am for many a day.
 I feel out of the very earth sometimes, as I sit here at the

window--with the little church, a field, a few houses, and the sea Such a soft sea & such a mournful wind!¹³

In several ways, "James Lee's Wife" is atypical of Browning's poetry. Ian Jack points out that "In telling a story by stages, rather than revealing it as it presents itself to the speaker at a single moment of time, 'James Lee' is unusual in Browning's work."¹⁴ The poem, composed of nine sections, carries the woman through a series of moods. In this poem, Browning stresses character, but his emphasis is on the feelings of the individual, not on the personality of that individual. We never even learn the woman's name. She is identified only as James Lee's wife because it is this identity with which she must learn to cope.

"James Lee's Wife" is not only like Tennyson's poems in its emphasis on mood but also in that it has the very mood one equates with Tennyson's (and Arnold's) work. Margaret Drabble points out that even in the poems written before Hallam's death, "The prevailing mood is one of melancholy and heaviness. . . ." in Tennyson's poems. She elaborates: "the characteristically Tennysonian world is one of dying swans, decaying flowers, dark rooks in elm trees, dark wolds, desolate creeks, dim meres, and dew-drenched wood walks."¹⁵ Though "James Lee's Wife" is melancholy in tone, it is unusual in the Browning canon. Browning's poems are noted for their emphatic optimism, from the gay independence of Fra Lippo Lippi to the defiance of Childe Roland blowing his slughorn to the bold assertiveness expressed by the speaker in "Prospice."

Therefore, while Browning sometimes uses techniques similar to those used by Tennyson and Arnold, there is no evidence that he was influenced strongly by their works. For the most part, Browning disagreed with the

other major poets of his period about the purpose of poetry. He insisted on dealing with "man man, whatever the issue!" ("Old Pictures in Florence," l. 148). He knew the works of his contemporaries but elected to pursue his own course.

Browning's work may also be compared to that of another set of his peers, the Pre-Raphaelites. Dante Gabriel Rossetti was one of the few readers who appreciated Browning's early work. Rossetti painted Browning's portrait, and he and Browning corresponded fairly regularly until Rossetti took offense at what he perceived to be a mockery of himself and his work in "Fifine at the Fair."¹⁶ Browning had other ties with the Pre-Raphaelites as well. Edward Burne-Jones used Browning's "Love Among the Ruins" as the basis for a painting. And John Everett Millais met Robert's son, Pen, and encouraged him to pursue a career as an artist. Of the other men closely allied with the Pre-Raphaelite movement, the one whom Browning knew best was John Ruskin. Robert and Elizabeth met Ruskin in 1852 when they returned to London to visit friends and relatives. Thereafter, the three exchanged letters and continued to meet occasionally. Ruskin admired the poetry of both Brownings and expressed his admiration in Modern Painters. Ruskin was sometimes troubled by what he deemed unnecessary obscurity in Robert's poems, but, on the whole, he spoke approvingly of them. In a February 1856 letter he awarded Browning a measure of his highest praise by labeling him a Pre-Raphaelite.¹⁷ On the surface, Ruskin's meaning is not clear; such a label does not seem to fit Browning. But an examination of Pre-Raphaelite techniques and of the artistic principles espoused by Ruskin which he saw evidenced in the paintings of the Pre-Raphaelites makes the assertion understandable.

The Pre-Raphaelite movement did not actually signal a revolution.

W. F. Axton maintains that the movement

constituted more a culmination or summation of changes in the English aesthetic climate during the first three-quarters of the last century than a violent and eccentric revolution against the artistic establishment, however they may have regarded themselves.¹⁸

In their delight in medieval subjects and their insistence on rich, sensuous imagery, for instance, they perpetuated Romantic techniques.

They revived older art forms as well. It was largely the Pre-Raphaelite love of medieval art which prompted their imitation of the exhaustive detail and clear, brilliant color famous in tapestries, stained glass, and book illustration of the Middle Ages.

Dedicated to literal reproduction of models--whether animal, vegetable, or human--the Pre-Raphaelites painted outdoors in full sunlight. They became so intent (following or paralleling Ruskin's admonishings) on accurately rendering reality through exacting representation of minute detail that they paid little attention to matters of perspective. As a result, the natural backgrounds in Pre-Raphaelite paintings often lack depth and distance.

Their interest was chiefly narrative. They chose biblical, historical, and literary subjects as well as contemporary subjects that provided social commentary. Since they did concentrate on narrative, the major Pre-Raphaelites produced few landscapes. In fact, one of the reasons that landscape painting on the whole declined as the nineteenth century advanced was the predominance of narrative subjects. Those landscapes that were painted typically served as the backdrop for a story illustrated in the foreground.

Truth to nature; minute detail; vivid, luminous color; and narrative interest characterize Pre-Raphaelite art. These traits also figure significantly in Browning's poetry. Like the Pre-Raphaelites, Browning accurately recorded natural detail in full, rich color. Like the Pre-Raphaelites, Browning emphasized narrative, using external nature to fashion a suitable background for the story. Like the Pre-Raphaelites, Browning drew on the past for subject matter, trying to recreate the spirit of a past age.

These are the traits Ruskin must have had in mind when he describes Browning as a Pre-Raphaelite. In Modern Painters, he praises Browning's ability to recreate the essence of medievalism, saying that he

is unerring in every sentence he writes of the Middle Ages; always vital, right, and profound; so that in the matter of art . . . there is hardly a principle connected with the medieval temper, that he has not struck upon in those seemingly careless and too rugged rhymes of his.¹⁹

And of "The Bishop Orders His Tomb at St. Praxed's Church," he claims:

I know no other piece of modern English, prose or poetry, in which there is so much told, as in these lines, of the Renaissance spirit,-- its worldliness, inconsistency, pride, hypocrisy, ignorance of itself, love of art, of luxury, and of good Latin.²⁰

Ruskin favored accurate, plausible reproduction of carefully observed subject matter. In Modern Painters he declares, "the greatest thing a human soul ever does in this world is to see something, and tell what it saw in a plain way."²¹ For Ruskin, Josephine Miles says, "the true ideal is naturalistic, it seeks things as they are."²² Browning shares this opinion. E. D. H. Johnson maintains that in Browning's view "The artist cannot do better than reproduce with as great fidelity as possible his

individual sense of observed fact. . . ."23 Browning voices this view through one of his most famous monologists, Fra Lippo Lippi.

Caught by the guards after midnight in an unrespectable part of town, Lippi tries to explain his behavior, with the result that he explains his art at the same time. As a poor orphaned boy, he roams the streets, scavenging for food and sleeping in alleyways. At the age of eight, in exchange for renouncing the world, he is taken into a convent, fed regular meals and given warm clothes. When the monks discover his talent for drawing, they instruct him to paint a mural. But they are shocked by what he paints:

. . . 'How? what's here?
 'Quite from the mark of painting, bless us all!
 'Faces, arms, legs and bodies like the true
 'As much as pea and pea! it's devil's-game! (ll. 175-178)

They chastise him:

'Your business is not to catch men with show,
 'With homage to the perishable clay,
 'But lift them over it, ignore it all,
 'Make them forget there's such a thing as flesh.
 'You business is to paint the souls of men-- (ll. 179-183)

But Lippo disagrees with their notion of art. He contends:

If you get simple beauty and nought else,
 You get about the best thing God invents:
 That's somewhat: and you'll find the soul you have missed,
 Within yourself, when you return him thanks. (ll. 217-220)

He recognizes that reality is nothing to be ashamed of. It is not sinful:

--The beauty and the wonder and the power,
 The shapes of things, their colours, lights and shades,
 Changes, surprises, --and God made it all! (ll. 282-285)

He asks:

. . . What's it all about?
 To be passed over, despised? or dwelt upon,
 Wondered at? oh, this last of course!--you say.
 But why not do as well as say,--paint these
 Just as they are, careless what comes of it? (ll. 290-294)

And then he answers his own questions:

For, don't you mark? we're made so that we love
 First when we see them painted, things we have passed
 Perhaps a hundred times nor cared to see;
 And so they are better, painted--better to us,
 Which is the same thing. Art was given for that;
 God uses us to help each other so,
 Lending our minds out. (ll. 300-306)

Ruskin and Browning agree with Fra Lippo Lippi that art should faithfully reproduce experience, for it is in this way that it can most effectively speak to man.

In keeping with this opinion, Ruskin disapproved of what he termed the pathetic fallacy, that is, the attribution of emotional traits and feelings to nonhuman objects. Such attribution is rare in Browning, another reason that Ruskin would have approved of his poetry. Josephine Miles, author of The Pathetic Fallacy in the Nineteenth Century, notes that use of the pathetic fallacy pervades eighteenth-century poetry, lessening in Romantic poetry as feeling moved from natural objects to man. In Tennyson and the Pre-Raphaelites, there is an "objectification of feelings."²⁴ Miles goes on to show how seldom Browning used the pathetic fallacy, explaining that "His pattern of the world was an outward pattern. He described not scene plus emotion from it, but scene plus people in it. . . ." ²⁵ The emphasis remains on character, not on nature.

In some respects, Browning and Ruskin look at the world in similar ways. Ruskin emphasizes clear sight more than imagination.²⁶ So does Browning. Whether he describes a human subject or one from nature, Browning attempts to do so accurately. Writing to Elizabeth Barrett in 1846, Robert quotes a critic who has said, "if three poets should go to a wood to write, one would read books on the wood before writing, one would write from stock associations, and Browning would sit down and look the wood over first."²⁷ This is undoubtedly why Ruskin approves, believing that Browning records what he sees.

Of the poems which Browning wrote, Pre-Raphaelite traits are perhaps most evident in "The Englishman in Italy" and "Saul." "The Englishman in Italy" is a dramatic monologue full of the sights, smells, and flavors of an Italian harvest. It is in its imagery that the poem is most Pre-Raphaelite in spirit. For, like a Pre-Raphaelite artist working with brush strokes on a canvas, Browning as artist uses words on paper to create a scene of Italian rural life, a scene marked by an abundance of brilliantly colored concrete natural detail. And in the last few lines, he superimposes upon the whole a message.

The speaker attempts to distract the attention of the boy Fortu from an approaching storm. He reminds him of the thirsty, sun-baked earth and the parched fruit:

Time for rain! for your long hot dry Autumn
 Had net-worked with brown
 The white skin of each grape on the bunches,
 Marked like a quail's crown,
 Those creatures you make such account of,
 Whose heads,--speckled white
 Over brown like a great spider's back, (ll. 13-19)

Pomegranates were chapping and splitting
 In halves on the tree:
 And betwixt the loose walls of great flintstone,
 Or in the thick dust
 On the path, or straight out of the rock-side,
 Wherever could thrust
 Some burnt sprig of bold hardy rock-flower
 Its yellow face up,
 For the prize were great butterflies fighting,
 Some five for one cup. (ll. 23-32)

Driven in by the approaching bad weather, the fisherman returns and surveys his catch:

--Our fisher arrive,
 And pitch down his basket before us,
 All trembling alive
 With pink and grey jellies, your sea-fruit;
 You touch the strange lumps,
 And mouths gape there, eyes open, all manner
 Of horns and of humps,
 Which only the fisher looks grave at,
 While round him like imps
 Cling screaming the children as naked
 And brown as his shrimps; (ll. 54-64)

The speaker moves from the beach to a description of the vineyard. Baskets-ful of freshly picked grapes are poured into enormous vats where barefooted youngsters dance until "Like blood the juice spins" (l. 74). Next, in a series of lush descriptive passages, the speaker tempts Fortù with an imaginary feast of pasta and fruit, cheese and wine:

. . . see the grape bunch they've brought you:
 The rain-water slips
 O'er the heavy blue bloom on each globe
 Which the wasp to your lips
 Still follows with fretful persistence: (ll. 101-105)

And end with the prickly-pear's red flesh
 That leaves thro' its juice
 The stony black seeds on your pearl-teeth. (ll. 113-115)

The storm comes, the wind and rain shaking the trees:

How the old twisted olive trunks shudder,
 The medlars let fall
 Their hard fruit, and the brittle great fig-trees
 Snap off, figs and all, (ll. 121-124)

As the storm breaks with full force, the speaker draws Fortù closer to him. Using vivid natural detail to stir the boy's imagination, he recalls a journey over the mountains with Fortù's brother:

And still as we urged
 Our way, the woods wondered, and left us,
 As up still we trudged
 Though the wild path grew wilder each instant,
 And place was e'en grudged
 'Mid the rock-chasms and piles of loose stones
 Like the loose broken teeth
 Of some monster which climbed there to die
 From the ocean beneath--
 Place was grudged to the silver-grey fume-weed
 That clung to the path,
 And dark rosemary ever a-dying
 That, 'spite the wind's wrath,
 So loves the salt rock's face to seaward,
 And lentisks as staunch
 To the stone where they root and bear berries,
 And . . . what shows a branch
 Coral-coloured, transparent, with circlets
 Of pale seagreen leaves; (ll. 148-166)

At the top of the mountain, they are greeted by a spectacular view. Spread out below them in one direction are the lush, fertile plains of the countryside, and in another, the rock-bounded sea.

As the Englishman ends his reminiscence, he realizes that the storm has ended and he calls attention to the peasants who have come outside to resume their work or make preparations for the next day's festival. From this gaiety, the speaker recalls that, by contrast, men in his own country are meeting to discuss the abolition of the Corn Laws, laws which mandated

a high tariff on imported grain, inflating the price of bread and subsequently placing increasing hardship on the poor.

"The Englishman in Italy" is a celebration of the simple but incredibly "rich" life of the Italian folk. As such, the majority of the poem consists of colorful Pre-Raphaelite images of the Neapolitan harvest.

In "Saul," a poem ultimately published in Men and Women, Browning also uses techniques often associated with the Pre-Raphaelites. The poem is based largely on the biblical account of Saul's first meeting with David. Character portrayal is not as extensive in this poem as in much of Browning's work, but psychological conflict is definitely emphasized. Ian Jack maintains, ". . . here Browning is concerned to render living and vivid a part of the Bible story . . . rather than to present a particular character."²⁸ More specifically, Browning portrays Saul's spiritual torment rather than analyzing his (or David's) personality. In the poem, Saul, with the help of David's music, gradually attains peace.

King Saul, beset by an evil spirit, has been advised by his servants to send for a young man to play the harp. Saul agrees, and David, a young shepherd, is summoned to comfort him. The scene within the tent is one which might readily be pictured in a Pre-Raphaelite painting. When David peers into the blackness of the tent, he immediately perceives the king's anguish, for Saul's emotional state is revealed in his rigid posture:

He stood as erect as that tent-prop, both arms stretched out wide
On the great cross-support in the centre, that goes to each side;
He relaxed not a muscle, but hung there as, caught in his pangs
And waiting his change, the king-serpent all heavily hangs, (ll. 28-31)

The stiff, unnatural pose of the king is Pre-Raphaelite in tone as is the dramatic quality of the setting--the interior of the tent shrouded in

darkness, Saul poised in the center illuminated by a single ray of sunlight "that burst thro' the tent-roof" (l. 27.)

In its exacting detail, the imagery throughout the poem is Pre-Raphaelite as well.²⁹ Much of the nature imagery surfaces in descriptions of David's music. David plays for Saul the songs he has often played while sitting on a hillside watching his sheep. They are songs of and to nature.

He begins with a soothing, placid tune:

And I first played the tune all our sheep know, as, one after one,
So docile they come to the pen-door till folding be done.
They are white and untorn by the bushes, for lo, they have fed
Where the long grasses stifle the water within the stream's bed;
And now one after one seeks its lodging, as star follows star
Into eve and the blue far above us,--so blue and so far! (ll. 36-41)

Next, he plays a more stirring melody:

--Then the tune, for which quails on the cornland will each leave
his mate
To fly after the player; then, what makes the crickets elate
Till for boldness they fight one another: and then, what has weight
To set the quick jerboa a-musing outside his sand house--
There are none such as he for a wonder, half bird and half mouse!
(ll. 42-46)

The songs become increasingly rousing. Finally, David breaks into a song of praise for life:

'Oh, the wild joys of living! the leaping from rock up to rock,
'The strong rending of boughs from the fir-tree, the cool silver
shock
'Of the plunge in a pool's living water, the hunt of the bear,
'And the sultriness showing the lion is couched in his lair.
'And the meal, the rich dates yellowed over with gold dust divine,
'And the locust-flesh steeped in the pitcher, the full draught of
wine,
'And the sleep in the dried river-channel where bulrushes tell

'That the water was wont to go warbling so softly and well.
 'How good is man's life, the mere living! how fit to employ
 'All the heart and the soul and the senses for ever in joy!
 (ll. 70-79)

Then David, in an intense effort, to help the king recover, compares his lord to a mighty mountain, worn and scarred, but still strong:

Have ye seen when Spring's arrowy summons goes right to the aim,
 And some mountain, the last to withstand her, that held (he alone,
 While the vale laughed in freedom and flowers) on a broad bust of
 stone
 A year's snow bound about for a breastplate,--leaves grasp of the
 sheet?
 Fold on fold all at once it crowds thunderously down to his feet,
 And there fronts you, stark, black, but alive yet, your mountain
 of old,
 With his rents, the successive bequeathings of ages untold--
 Yea, each harm got in fighting your battles, each furrow and scar
 Of his head thrust 'twixt you and the tempest--all hail, there they
 are!
 -Now again to be softened with verdure, again hold the nest
 Of the dove, tempt the goat and its young to the green on his crest
 For their food in the ardours of summer. (ll. 104-115)

When David realizes that this has wakened the king from total despair, he calls to his master to accept "Again a long draught of my soul-wine!" (l. 175).

David's songs have not only restored Saul but have strengthened his own faith. He recognizes that his power to aid the king through his music has come from God. The poem closes with David's return to the hillside. All about him he sees evidence of the majesty of God:

Anon at the dawn, all that trouble had withered from earth--
 Not so much, but I saw it die out in the day's tender birth;
 In the gathered intensity brought to the grey of the hills;
 In the shuddering forests' held breath; in the sudden wind-thrills;
 In the startled wild beasts that bore off, each with eye sidling
 still
 Though averted with wonder and dread; in the birds stiff and chill
 That rose heavily, as I approached them, made stupid with awe:

E'en the serpent that slid away silent,--he felt the new law.
 The same stared in the white humid faces upturned by the flowers;
 The same worked in the heart of the cedar and moved the vine-bowers;
 And the little brooks witnessing murmured, persistent and low,
 With their obstinate, all but hushed voices--'E'en so, it is so!
 (ll. 324-335)

Roma King Jr. shows that the final imagery (like that in lines 70-79, previously quoted) "is used as a medium for expressing a psychological state of mind," in this passage, "the awesome sense of God's presence in creation both as law and as love."³⁰ Throughout, the poem speaks eloquently for the healing powers of nature and of music, both God-given gifts.

While "The Englishman in Italy" and "Saul" contain elements that are strongly suggestive of Pre-Raphaelite art, there is, nevertheless, no concrete evidence that Browning was directly influenced by the movement. There is no indication of Browning's consciously imitating Pre-Raphaelite techniques. It may very well be that, like the Pre-Raphaelites, but independent from them, Browning was pursuing certain traits of Romanticism which satisfied him aesthetically and served his artistic purposes, namely, dramatic portrayal of historical people and events and detailed sense images drawn from external nature. Moreover, his interest in human psychology explains his use of dramatic and narrative forms. In turn, it is not surprising that he would present human emotion through concrete natural imagery, imagery that would help his readers to see and hear and feel.

Browning, even on the rare occasions when he seems to be writing poems like those of his contemporaries, is instead more than likely testing forms, trying new patterns, experimenting with new techniques. While

he admired individual works by other authors, he did not admire any of his fellow poets enough to justify imitation. His poems are never so similar to those of other Victorians that a direct connection can be established.

ENDNOTES TO CHAPTER VI

¹Margaret Drabble, A Writer's Britain: Landscape in Literature (New York: Knopf, 1979), p. 191.

²Edward D. H. Johnson, The Alien Vision of Victorian Poetry: Sources of the Poetic Imagination in Tennyson, Browning, and Arnold (Hamden: Archon Books, 1963), p. 148.

³Joseph Hillis Miller, The Disappearance of God: Five Nineteenth-Century Writers (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1963), p. 1.

⁴Thurman L. Hood, ed., Letters of Robert Browning Collected by Thomas J. Wise (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1933), p. 199.

⁵Miller, p. 113.

⁶Ian Jack, Browning's Major Poetry (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973), p. 93.

⁷Hood, p. 134.

⁸Drabble, p. 189.

⁹William Clyde DeVane, A Browning Handbook (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1935; rev. 1955), p. 286.

¹⁰DeVane, p. 226.

¹¹William O. Raymond, "'The Jewelled Bow': A Study in Browning's Imagery and Humanism: in Robert Browning: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Philip Drew (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin Company, 1966), p. 127.

¹²DeVane, p. 286.

¹³McAleer, Edward C., ed. Dearest Isa: Robert Browning's Letters to Isabella Blagden (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1951), p. 119.

¹⁴Jack, p. 246.

¹⁵Drabble, p. 187.

¹⁶William Irvine and Park Honan, The Book, the Ring, and the Poet (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1974), pp. 468-469.

¹⁷David DeLaura, "Ruskin and the Brownings: Twenty-five Unpublished Letters." Bulletin of the John Rylands Library, 54 (1971), 330.

¹⁸W. F. Axton, "Victorian Landscape Painting: A Change in Outlook," in Nature and the Victorian Imagination, eds. U. C. Knoepfelmacher and G. B. Tennyson (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977), p. 300.

¹⁹John Ruskin, Modern Painters in The Works of John Ruskin, eds. E. T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn (London: George Allen, 1905), VI, 446-447.

²⁰Ruskin, VI, 449.

²¹Ruskin, V, 333.

²²Josephine Miles, Pathetic Fallacy in the Nineteenth Century: A Study of a Changing Relation Between Object and Emotion (New York: Octagon Books, 1965), p. 66.

²³Johnson, p. 117.

²⁴Miles, p. 44.

²⁵Miles, pp. 45-46.

²⁶Miles, p. 67.

²⁷Cited from Miles, p. 80.

²⁸Jack, p. 155.

²⁹Roma King, Jr., The Bow and the Lyre: The Art of Robert Browning (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1957), p. 101.

³⁰King, p. 113.

CHAPTER VII

CONCLUSION

The preceding chapters have explored the influences which most affected Robert Browning's use of external nature. His work shows evidence of the effects of the neoclassical prescriptions of Gerard de Lairese, of the aesthetic categories of the picturesque, the sublime, and the grotesque, and of the traits of the Romantic movement. Furthermore, his poetry shows that he shared some of the tendencies of other nineteenth-century poets and artists. But even after a study of these influences, it is still difficult to say whether he wrote with any theoretical preconceptions. Browning as poet remains an elusive figure. He wrote little about his own work or about the work of others. He left no general treatises on poetry. His poetry alone remains to speak for him, and it is a confusing guide. His poems resist neat classifications, as his use of external nature illustrates. Natural details characteristic of the grotesque, the sublime, the picturesque, and the Pre-Raphaelite are all used--on occasion to coincide with human personality, on occasion to contrast ironically with it. Sometimes nature in Browning's poems seems to sympathize with man; sometimes to scorn him; sometimes to be oblivious to him. No pervasive pattern exists.

Even more than his poetry, Browning the poet defies labeling. Part of the problem is that Browning evinced a persistent reluctance to play the part of the poet. Griffin and Minchin point out that "he seemed, in general society, anxious not to be reminded, or to remind others, that he

was a poet."¹ Browning the poet and Browning the public individual often appear to be two different men.

As the preceding chapters have shown, Browning's use of nature is eclectic and idiosyncratic. In fact, his whole body of work may be so described. It yields no definitive explanation, no unified picture of Browning, either as a poet or as an individual. Thus, it is necessary to examine other evidence to try to determine why he writes as he does. One source, his contemporary, Henry James, helps us to see Browning as a person. A second source, Browning's "Essay on Shelley," helps us to see Browning as a poet, judging the poetry of another--of the poet whose work he had so admired as a young man. The "Essay on Shelley," therefore, reveals to us what Browning valued in poetry. By examining Browning both from the outside, through James's perceptive observations, and from the inside, through Browning's own remarks about poetry, we can move toward an understanding of Browning's use of external nature.

Henry James was one of the earliest to comment explicitly on the difference between Browning the artist and Browning the social lion. As a young man, James read Browning and greatly admired his poetry. In 1876-1877, James went to London where he was introduced into the most fashionable circles. At the time, one of the Englishmen most in demand at London dinner tables was Robert Browning. Consequently, on several occasions, James and Browning were guests at the same dinner parties. James had relished the opportunity to make the acquaintance of the author whom he so revered, but the meeting proved disappointing:

¹Robert B. I am sorry to say . . . does not make on me a purely agreeable impression. His transparent eagerness to hold the di

de la conversation and a sort of shrill interruptingness which distinguishes him have in them a kind of vulgarity. Beside which, strange to say, his talk doesn't strike me as very good. It is altogether gossip and personality and is not very beautifully worded. But evidently there are two Brownings--an esoteric and an exoteric. The former never peeps out in society, and the latter has not a ray of suggestion of Men and Women.³

This last notion--the idea of two Brownings--became over a decade later the basis for a short story by James.

In the intervening years, Browning and James frequently came in contact, and they eventually became neighbors. In 1883 James moved into a house at 34 DeVere Gardens. The following year Browning moved into number 22 across the street where he resided until his death five years later.⁴ James's admiration for Browning's work never ceased; neither did his astonishment over Browning's public personality. He continued to find it difficult to accept that the man he sat across from at a fashionable dinner table was the same man who had written Paracelsus and "Andrea del Sarto" and The Ring and the Book. In a letter James records:

One of my latest sensations was going one day to Lady Airlie's to hear Browning read his own poems--with the comfort of finding that, at least, if you don't understand them, he himself apparently understands them even less. He read them as if he hated them and would like to bite them to pieces.⁵

Shortly after Browning's death in 1889, James used the inconsistency he had perceived as the subject for a short story entitled "The Private Life."⁶ James's story captures the enigma that was Robert Browning.

In James's tale, a fashionable party has gathered at a resort in the Swiss Alps. In addition to the narrator (who apparently is an aspiring author himself), the group consists of Lord and Lady Mellifont; Blanche Adney, a celebrated actress, and her husband; and Clare Vawdrey, a

brilliant novelist. It is Vawdrey who is modeled on Robert Browning.

From the beginning, Vawdrey is a curious character. He is charming and friendly--even gregarious--but to the narrator's disappointment "He never talked about himself."⁷ Moreover, in the narrator's opinion, Vawdrey doesn't express himself as one expects a renowned novelist to express himself. The narrator complains to Blanche Adney: "I never found him [Vawdrey] anything but loud and cheerful and copious, and I never heard him utter a paradox or express a shade or play with an idea" (pp. 191-192).

While Vawdrey remains an active member of the group--constantly socializing--he simultaneously makes progress with a play which Blanche has petitioned him to write. One evening, having solicited a performance from Vawdrey, the group gathers to hear the "magnificent passage" he claims to have written before dinner (p. 199). But to the chagrin of the company:

Suddenly, instead of beginning, our tame lion began to roar out of tune--he had clean forgotten every word. He was very sorry, but the lines absolutely wouldn't come to him; he was utterly ashamed, but his memory was a blank. He didn't look in the least ashamed--Vawdrey had never looked ashamed in his life; he was only imperturbably and merrily natural (p. 200).

By accident, the narrator discovers the reason for Vawdrey's sudden forgetfulness. Thinking that if he locates the manuscript of the play the author will not be able to refuse a reading, the narrator leaves Vawdrey and Blanche Adney conversing on the terrace and hurries upstairs to Vawdrey's room. To his amazement, when he opens the door, he finds Vawdrey there in the darkened room, poised at his writing table, composing. The writer, apparently deep in thought, never acknowledges the narrator's

presence. Returning to the terrace, he discovers that both Vawdrey and Mrs. Adney are gone.

Several days later, the narrator confides in Blanche. When she tells him that Vawdrey could not have been in his room, that the two of them took a late walk together, the narrator describes to her what he saw in the writer's sitting room: ". . . it looked like the author of Vawdrey's admirable works. It looked infinitely more like him than our friend does himself. . ." (p. 209). As they soon learn, the Clare Vawdrey whom the narrator found at the writing table is more like himself--is more Clare Vawdrey--than the man with whom Blanche shared the moonlight. They gradually come to realize that there are two Clare Vawdreys. "One goes out," the narrator reasons, "the other stays at home. One is the genius, the other's the bourgeois. . ." (p. 210). It is the private Vawdrey who is the artist. This helps to explain why the public Vawdrey never discusses his work, why he cannot remember a passage he has written for a new play. The narrator claims that Vawdrey "disappoints every one who looks in him for the genius who created the pages they adore. Where is it in his talk?" the narrator asks (p. 209). Of course, the narrator ultimately recognizes that he should not even expect it in Vawdrey's talk. The genius resides in the author's private life.

Like Vawdrey the social presence and Vawdrey the novelist, Browning the social presence and Browning the poet seem to have been two very different men. Browning, throughout his life, seemed to waver between a delight in society and a longing for seclusion and privacy. From childhood on, Robert had very strong family ties. He disliked school, preferring the more entertaining lessons his father devised for him at home. At the age of sixteen, he was lodged in London and enrolled at University

College. But after only a week, he returned home to live and quit college altogether in the second term.⁸ He remained in his parents' home, alternately writing such introspective poems as Pauline and Paracelsus and such dramatic poems as "Porphyria's Lover" and "Johannes Agricola." He resolved not to marry since he was financially dependent on his father, but he broke that resolve in 1845 when he met Elizabeth Barrett, an invalid poetess six years his senior. Their marriage in September 1846 brought considerable notoriety to the pair. For the tale of a daring and handsome poet rescuing a frail, gentle poetess from her tyrannical father readily captured the popular imagination. Nevertheless, the couple enjoyed a rather quiet life together in Italy. Fifteen years later, when Elizabeth died, Robert returned to London and devoted himself to his poetry and to the education of his son. Maintaining his insistence on privacy, he firmly refused to authorize the publication of his wife's letters or the writing of her biography.

Robert's unmarried sister Sarianna came to share his home in 1866. During the last three decades of his life, Robert was in constant demand, receiving far more social invitations than he could possibly accept. He did accept a great many invitations though, so many that he scarcely ever dined at home. Wherever he went, he entertained the gentlemen and charmed the women with his talk, but he steadfastly refused to discuss his poetry or his personal life. He rarely agreed to read his poetry or to answer questions about it. And he apparently was quite adept at steering the conversation away from personal matters. One woman, Mrs. Arthur Sidgwick, met him in 1882 at Balliol and wrote of that meeting:

'He took me down to dinner, and on the stairs I discovered the kind, blue-eyed man to be friendly and not formidable: He talked on any subject; we selected the Cherwell water-rats, which interested us both; but I was all the time trying to get him to talk of his wife, and, as far as I remember, we spoke of Florence and of Venice.'⁹

It seems, then, that ". . . though he was physically present on the London scene his thoughts often were elsewhere."¹⁰

Browning steadily won more acclaim, becoming in the early 1880's "a public institution."¹¹ He received honorary degrees from Oxford and Cambridge, and F. J. Furnivall established the Browning Society. Though he enjoyed public recognition, he continued to enjoy privacy. It became habitual for Robert and Sarianna to retreat for a few months each year to some quiet spot in the Italian countryside or to some secluded niche in the Swiss Alps. During the 1860's, 1870's, and 1880's his poetic style, like his lifestyle, fluctuated. His work ranged from dramatic, The Ring and the Book, to political, "Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau," to intensely personal, "La Saisiez." The contrast in these last years between his serious, abstract, often obtuse poetry and his carefree social life is especially striking. Irvine and Honan refer to the juxtaposition between his "brooding creative life and his invariably gay social one."¹²

It sometimes seems that the public Browning was a character created by the private Browning. For years he dramatized through his poetry the lives of characters he created. Perhaps his tendency toward dramatizing carried over spontaneously into his everyday life. Morse Peckham contends that "in public Browning himself becomes a dramatic monologist. . . ."¹³ Robert Langbaum points out that "the speaker of the dramatic monologue starts with an established point of view, and is not concerned with its truth but with trying to impress it on the outside world."¹⁴ By appearing

behind a public mask and by putting his most important poetic messages into the mouths of fictional or pseudo-biographical characters, Browning successfully eludes the grasp of his audience. He remains undefinable.

And yet there are clues to Browning's view of himself as a poet. While he left no poetic manifestos, he did write one essay which reveals some of his mature thinking about poets and poetry. In the fall of 1851, at the request of Edward Moxon, Browning wrote an essay which was to serve as an introduction to a new collection of letters by Shelley. The book was published in 1852, but before it was distributed the letters were found to be spurious, so the book was never released. The essay is largely an attempted vindication of the personal life and attitudes of Shelley, Browning's boyhood idol. But what Browning says in the essay also helps to explain some aspects of his own work, including his treatment of nature.

In the essay, Browning classifies poets as objective or subjective. Naming Shakespeare as the prototype, Browning maintains that the objective poet deals with the external world, the world of men and women, and tries to present it to his readers in a fresh, new way. The subjective poet, whom Browning considers the greater of the two, concentrates on relaying his own personal reactions to the outside world. For Browning, Shelley is the most accomplished of the subjective poets.

Browning maintains that there is no difference "in the faculty of the two poets. . . ." ¹⁵ Both are exceptional in that they are more sensitive and more perceptive than the average man. Nor is there a difference "in the nature of the objects contemplated by either. . ." (p. 139). The only distinction is in the purposes of the two. The objective poet

chooses to deal with the doings of men, (the result of which dealing, in its pure form, when even description, as suggesting a describer, is dispensed with, is what we call dramatic poetry), while the subjective poet, whose study has been himself, appealing through himself to the absolute Divine mind, prefers to dwell upon those external scenic appearances which strike out most abundantly and uninterruptedly his inner light and power, selects that silence of the earth and sea in which he can best hear the beating of his individual heart. . . (p. 139).

The subjective poet's art is the higher art because he creates "not so much with reference to the many below as to the one above him, the supreme Intelligence which apprehends all things in their absolute truth. . . (p. 138).

But in either case, whether the poet's style is objective or subjective, Browning believes that "the human interest" should be emphasized. He argues that either artist is at fault

when, subsidiarily to the human interest of his work his occasional illustrations from scenic nature are introduced as in the earlier works of the originative painters--men and women filling the foreground with consummate mastery, while mountain, grove and rivulet show like an anticipatory revenge on that succeeding race of landscape-painters whose 'figures' disturb the perfection of their earth and sky. (pp. 139-140)

In this passage, Browning expresses the view that he adheres to throughout his work--the view that natural detail should not become overbearing, that character should remain foremost.

In the "Essay on Shelley," Browning also expresses his opinion about interpreting an artist's work in light of his life. Here Browning distinguishes between the two types of poets. He contends that because of the nature of the objective poet's work, a biography of him would be very interesting, but not essential to an understanding of his poetry (p. 138).

But since the subjective poet draws on his own perceptions and insights, it is necessary to know him as an individual. His biography is indispensable (p. 141).

In his earliest published poems (Pauline, Paracelsus, Sordello), Browning writes in the subjective vein, but his work soon becomes more objective. In actuality, Browning's best poetry blends the objective and the subjective. Alba H. Warren comments on Browning's theory and his practice:

The poetry of the objective poet takes the form of representation, and its literary medium, the drama or the epic; that of the subjective poet, of expression, and its medium, the lyric. Browning's 'invention' of the dramatic lyric was, in fact, the result of his effort to unite representation and expression, to incorporate both the real and the ideal in a single poetic form.¹⁶

That is, in the dramatic monologue, Browning produces a kind of "subjective objectivity."

Yet Browning himself does not see his work that way. By 1857 when he writes the "Essay on Shelley," he is clearly aligning himself with the objective poets. Philip Drew notes that "it is plain from the Essay that Browning regarded the sort of poetry that he wrote as quite distinct from its creator."¹⁷ Others did not always agree: a few years later, in 1855, Ruskin writes to him complaining:

. . . I entirely deny that a poet of your real dramatic power ought to let himself come up, as you constantly do, through all manner of characters, so that every now and then poor Pippa herself shall speak a long piece of Robert Browning.¹⁸

Browning is reluctant to concede. He replies:

The last charge I cannot answer, for you may be right in preferring it, however unwitting I am of the fact. I may put Robert Browning into Pippa and other men and maids. If so, peccavi: but I don't see myself in them, at all events.¹⁹

Browning steadily maintains that a definite distinction exists between him and the characters he creates. As many other critics have done, Philip Drew observes that ". . . Browning resisted throughout his career any attempt to interpret his poems in the light of his life or, conversely, to establish his personal opinions from those of the characters in his poems."²⁰ J. Hillis Miller maintains that actually "Browning has no separate life of his own because he lives his life in his poetry."²¹ He is motivated by a ". . . passionate desire to place himself in the interior of other lives. . . ." whether it be the life of a plant, an animal, or a person.²²

Even his private writing--his personal correspondence--does not expose him. In his "Essay on Shelley," Browning discusses the usefulness of studying a writer's correspondence:

Letters and poems are obviously an act of the same mind, produced by the same law, only differing in the application to the individual or collective understanding. Letters and poems may be used indifferently as the basement of our opinion upon the writer's character; the finished expression of a sentiment in the poems, giving light and significance to the rudiments of the same in the letters, and these, again, in their incipiency and unripeness, authenticating the exalted mood and reattaching it to the personality of the writer (p. 145).

Ironically--perhaps deliberately--Browning's letters do not tell us much. Critics (and acquaintances like Henry James) have often commented on the "verbal inadequacy of Browning."²³ Whether Browning was actually verbally inadequate, or merely reticent to express himself openly, is difficult to determine. In any event, whatever the reason, Browning's letters provide

few clues to the real man. Referring to the letters written by Robert to Elizabeth Barrett during their courtship, Irvine and Honan maintain, "for all their patience, good sense, courage, and splendid passion, his letters remain somewhat opaque, somewhat mysterious. At the end of a thousand pages, one sees her clearly; one does not see Robert so."²⁴ And for the first few years of his marriage, Robert was strangely silent, scarcely heard from at all. He wrote few letters and no new poetry. Irvine and Honan point out, "what Browning really did and thought during these years we must see through Elizabeth's eyes. . . ."²⁵ Later, Browning did condescend to answer questions about his poems which were posed by the founder of the Browning Society, Dr. F. J. Furnivall. But it was John Ruskin who stirred Browning to some of his most explicit statements about his poetry and about himself as a poet.

On December 2, 1855, Ruskin had written in a letter to Browning a long, involved attack of "Popularity," questioning word choice, pronunciations, and rhythm, and asking Browning to explicate the poem line by line. Browning replied to Ruskin's charge of obscurity as follows:

I know that I don't make out my conception by my language: all poetry being a putting the infinite within the finite. You would have me paint it all plain out, which can't be; but by various artifices I try to make shift with touches and bits of outlines which succeed if they bear the conception from me to you.²⁶

And Browning shows his impatience with being told to speak clearly by asking, "Do you think poetry was ever generally understood--or can be?"²⁷ He contends, "A poet's affair is with God, to whom he is accountable, and of whom is his reward. . . . No--they [works of literature] act upon a very few, who react upon the rest. . . ." He closes by insisting, somewhat bitterly, it seems, ". . . I shall never change my point of sight,

or feel other than disconcerted and apprehensive when the public, critics and all, begin to understand and approve me."²⁸ Browning, then, did not feel it necessary to explain his poems. His poetry, he felt, could speak for itself. Not everyone would understand it, but then not everyone was expected to.

Moreover, Browning did not deem it necessary to share his private life with the reader. Having shared his poetry was enough. By doing so, he made himself vulnerable--susceptible to the vagaries of public opinion. He undoubtedly did not want to make any other aspect of his life equally vulnerable. He regularly petitioned friends to destroy his letters. Browning was apparently especially sensitive to criticism. John Stuart Mill's critical response to Pauline showed him the dangers of expressing himself too openly; while it is doubtful that Mill's comments permanently damaged Browning, they did teach him to speak more indirectly, to efface himself behind a carefully constructed character.

In addition, there is in Browning a restlessness, a striving, a persistent searching for the best forms, the most compelling characters, the most effective imagery. Consequently, his poetry is a poetry of contrasts, of contradictions, which defies neat molds. To illustrate, the natural scenery Browning creates is distinctive. It is alive and energetic. It is real--not dreamlike or intensely personal or escapist. The reader can actually see the moonlit stretch of beach in "Meeting at Night"; the dark, threatening forest of "Ivan Ivanovitch"; the slimy water world Caliban inhabits; the desolate seacoast in "James Lee's Wife"; the crumbling chapel set deep among the quiet pines in "By the Fire-Side"; and the stark, gray mining region of "The Flight of the Duchess." Even the sur-

real settings, such as the wasteland through which Childe Roland wanders and the misty regions associated with death in "Prospice," seem real. Each of these settings is credible. To produce this lifelike quality, Browning was willing to experiment with techniques to find the most suitable ones.

Browning's willingness to experiment with the treatment of external nature parallels his willingness to experiment with every aspect of his poetry: with points of view, with character types, with rhyme and rhythm. Never rigid or self-restrictive, he constantly adapts his style to suit a particular theme. He avoids a commitment to any one method of writing poetry and so achieves an incredible range of effects. Browning moves with ease from the desert sands of "Karshish" to the alpine splendor of "La Saisiaz." He creates the speaker of "Up at a Villa" who expresses his boredom and disgust with life in the country, as well as the speaker of "Home Thoughts from Abroad" who fondly reminisces about the pastoral charm of rural England. In Pauline the lovers daydream about a lush tropical retreat, while in "How They Brought the Good News" the only natural details mentioned are the few sharp features of the landscape glimpsed by the galloping horseman as he races to Aix-la-Chapelle. Such variety results from Browning's artistic exploration. Such variety yields the richness of Robert Browning's art. And the variousness of his natural settings--and of his techniques in rendering those settings--is part of the total richness.

Browning's work does not fit neatly into any chapter in the history of ideas or into any movement in the history of aesthetics. To the contrary, a detailed study of any aspect of his work--in this instance, his

use of nature, natural imagery, and natural settings--reveals that Browning is consistent in his inconsistency; he is predictable in his unpredictability. Further, such a study makes us aware that inconsistency is not a weakness in his art. One comes to appreciate Browning for his ambitious searching, for his flexibility, for his inventiveness. The reader often discovers that he would not wish Browning any other way.

ENDNOTES TO CHAPTER VII

¹W. Hall Griffin and Harry C. Minchin, The Life of Robert Browning with Notices of his Writings, his Family, and his Friends (1910; rev. 1938; rpt. Hamden: Archon Books, 1966), p. 286.

²Leon Edel, The Conquest of London. Vol. II of Henry James (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1962), p. 330.

³Edel, The Conquest of London, p. 330.

⁴Leon Edel, The Middle Years. Vol. III of Henry James (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1962), p. 160.

⁵Edel, The Conquest of London, p. 374.

⁶Edel, The Middle Years, p. 277.

⁷Henry James, "The Private Life" in The Complete Tales of Henry James, ed. Leon Edel (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1963), VIII, 191. All further references to this work appear in the text.

⁸William Irvine and Park Honan, The Book, the Ring, and the Poet (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1974), p. 20.

⁹Griffin and Minchin, p. 271.

¹⁰Nathaniel Irwin Hart, "The Nature of the Grotesque in Robert Browning's Poetry," Diss. University of Minnesota 1968, p. 196.

¹¹Irvine and Honan, p. 499.

¹²Irvine and Honan, p. 400.

¹³Morse Peckham, "Personality and the Mask of Knowledge" in Victorian Revolutionaries: Speculations on Some Heroes of a Culture Crisis (New York: George Braziller Publishers, 1970), p. 118.

¹⁴Robert Langbaum, "The Dramatic Element: Truth as Perspective" in Robert Browning: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Philip Drew (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin Company, 1966), p. 140.

¹⁵Robert Browning, "Essay on Shelley," in The Complete Works of Robert Browning with Variant Readings and Annotations, ed. Roma A. King, Jr., et. al. (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1981), p. 139. Further references to this essay appear in the text.

¹⁶Alba H. Warren, Jr., English Poetic Theory: 1825-1865 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1950), p. 116.

¹⁷Philip Drew, The Poetry of Robert Browning: A Critical Introduction (London: Methuen and Company, 1970), p. 9.

¹⁸David DeLaura, "Ruskin and the Brownings: Twenty-five Unpublished Letters," Bulletin of the John Rylands Library, 54 (1971), 326.

¹⁹W. G. Collingwood, The Life and Works of John Ruskin (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin Company, 1893), I, 234.

²⁰Drew, p. 9.

²¹Joseph Hillis Miller, The Disappearance of God: Five Nineteenth-Century Writers (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1963), p. 102.

²²Miller, p. 116.

²³Richard D. Altick, "The Private Life of Robert Browning" in The Browning Critics, eds. Boyd Litzinger and K. L. Knickerbocker (n. p.: University of Kentucky Press, 1965), p. 252.

²⁴Irvine and Honan, p. 192.

²⁵Irvine and Honan, p. 227.

²⁶Quoted in Collingwood, I, 232.

²⁷Quoted in Collingwood, I, 234.

²⁸Quoted in Collingwood, I, 235.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Armstrong, Isobel, ed. Writers and Their Background: Robert Browning. Athens: Ohio University Press, 1975.
- Armstrong, Isobel, ed. "Browning and the 'Grotesque' Style." In The Major Victorian Poets: Reconsiderations. Ed. Isobel Armstrong. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1969, pp. 93-123.
- Bagehot, Walter. "Wordsworth, Tennyson, and Browning; or, Pure, Ornate, and Grotesque Art in English Poetry." National Review, 19 (November 1864), n. p. Rpt. in Literary Studies. Ed. Richard Holt Hutton. Vol. II. London: Longmans, Green, and Company, 1973, pp. 338-390.
- Beach, Joseph Warren. The Concept of Nature in Nineteenth Century English Poetry. New York: Macmillan, 1936.
- Binyon, Laurence. Landscape in English Art and Poetry. 1929; rpt. n. p.: Folcroft Press, 1970.
- Boase, T. S. R. English Art: 1800-1870. Vol. X of The Oxford History of English Art. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1959.
- Brooke, Stopford A. The Poetry of Robert Browning. New York: T. Y. Crowell and Company, 1902.
- Broughton, Leslie N. and Benjamin F. Stelter. A Concordance to the Poems of Robert Browning. 2 vols. New York: G. E. Stechert and Company, 1925.
- Cadbury, William. "Lyric and Anti-Lyric Forms: A Method for Judging Browning." University of Toronto Quarterly, 34 (October 1964), 49-67.
- Campbell, Lily B. "The Grotesque in the Poetry of Robert Browning." Bulletin of the University of Texas, No. 92, Humanistic Series, No. 5 (April 1, 1907), 3-41. Rpt. in Collected Papers of Lily B. Campbell: First Published in Various Journals, 1907-1952. Introd. Louis B. Wright. New York: Russell and Russell, 1968, pp. 3-41.
- Catalogue of Pictures, Drawings and Engravings, Autograph Letters and Manuscripts, Books, and Works of Art, The Property of R. W. Barrett Browning, Esq. by London: Sotheby, Wilkinson and Hodge. London: Dryden Press, 1913.
- Chesterton, G. K. Robert Browning. New York: Macmillan Company, 1903.

- Clark, Kenneth. Landscape Into Art. 1949; rpt. New York: Harper and Row, 1976.
- Clayborough, Arthur. The Grotesque in English Literature. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965.
- Collingwood, W. G. The Life and Works of John Ruskin. Vol. I. Boston: Houghton-Mifflin Company, 1893.
- Cook, Edward T. Life of John Ruskin. Vol. I. London: George Allen and Company, 1912.
- DeLaura, David. "Ruskin and the Brownings: Twenty-five Unpublished Letters," Bulletin of the John Rylands Library, 54 (1971), 314-356.
- DeVane, William Clyde. A Browning Handbook. 1935; rev. New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1955.
- DeVane, William Clyde. Browning's Parleyings: The Autobiography of a Mind. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1927.
- DeVane, William Clyde. "The Landscape of Browning's 'Childe Roland.'" PMLA, 40 (1925), 426-432.
- DeVane, William Clyde and Kenneth L. Knickerbocker. New Letters of Robert Browning. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1950.
- Drabble, Margaret. A Writer's Britain: Landscape in Literature. New York: Knopf, 1979.
- Drew, Philip. The Poetry of Browning: A Critical Introduction. London: Methuen and Company, 1970.
- Drew, Philip, ed. Robert Browning: A Collection of Critical Essays. Boston: Houghton-Mifflin Company, 1966.
- Edel, Leon. The Untried Years: 1843-1870. Vol. I of Henry James. Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1953.
- Edel, Leon. The Conquest of London: 1870-1881. Vol. II of Henry James. Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1962.
- Edel, Leon. The Middle Years: 1882-1895. Vol. III of Henry James. Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1962.
- Edel, Leon. The Treacherous Years: 1895-1901. Vol. IV of Henry James. Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1969.
- Edel, Leon. The Master: 1901-1916. Vol. V of Henry James. Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1972.

- Faverty, Frederick E., ed. The Victorian Poets: A Guide to Research. 2nd ed. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1968.
- Gaunt, William. The Restless Century: Painting in Britain, 1800-1900. London: Phaidon Press, 1972.
- Griffin, W. Hall and Harry C. Minchin. The Life of Robert Browning with Notices of his Writings, his Family, and his Friends. 1910; rev. 1938; rpt. Hamden: Archon Books, 1966.
- Haines, Lewis F. "Mill and 'Pauline.'" Modern Language Notes, 69 (June 1944), 410-412.
- Hair, Donald S. Browning's Experiments with Genre. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1972.
- Hart, Nathaniel Irwin. "The Nature of the Grotesque in Robert Browning's Poetry." Diss. University of Minnesota 1968.
- Hilton, Timothy. The Pre-Raphaelites. New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1970.
- Hipple, Walter John, Jr. The Beautiful, the Sublime, and the Picturesque in Eighteenth-Century British Aesthetic Theory. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1957.
- Hitner, John M. "Browning's Grotesque Period." Victorian Poetry, 4 (Winter 1966), 1-13.
- Honan, Park. Browning's Characters: A Study in Poetic Technique. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1961.
- Honan, Park. "On Robert Browning and Romanticism." Browning Institute Studies, 1 (1973), 147-172.
- Hood, Thurman L., ed. Letters of Robert Browning Collected by Thomas J. Wise. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1933.
- Hussey, Christopher. The Picturesque. New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1927.
- Irvine, William and Park Honan. The Book, the Ring, and the Poet. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1974.
- Jack, Ian. Browning's Major Poetry. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973.
- James, Henry. "The Private Life." In Vol. VIII of The Complete Tales of Henry James. Ed. Leon Edel. Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1963.
- Johnson, Edward D. H. The Alien Vision of Victorian Poetry: Sources of The Poetic Imagination in Tennyson, Browning, and Arnold. Hamden: Archon Books, 1963.

- Kayser, Wolfgang. The Grotesque in Art and Literature. Trans. Ulrich Weisstein. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1963.
- Kelley, Philip and Ronald Hudson. The Brownings' Correspondence: A Checklist. New York: The Browning Institute Inc. and The Wedgstone Press, 1978.
- Kenyon, F. G., ed. The Works of Robert Browning. 10 vols. London: Smith, Elder and Company, 1912.
- King, Roma A., Jr. The Bow and the Lyre: The Art of Robert Browning. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1957.
- King, Roma A., Jr. The Focusing Artifice: The Poetry of Robert Browning. Athens: Ohio University Press, 1968.
- Kintgen, Eugene R. "Childe Roland and the Perversity of Mind." Victorian Poetry, 4 (Autumn 1966), 253-258.
- Kintner, Elvan, ed. The Letters of Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett Barrett, 1845-1846. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1969.
- Knoepflmacher, U. C. and G. B. Tennyson, eds. Nature and the Victorian Imagination. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977.
- Korg, Jacob. "Browning's Art and 'By the Fire-Side.'" Victorian Poetry, 15 (1977), 147-158.
- Lairesse, Gerard de. The Art of Painting in All Its Branches. Rev. W. M. Craig. 2 vols. London: Edward Orme, 1817.
- Langbaum, Robert. The Poetry of Experience: The Dramatic Monologue in Modern Literary Tradition. New York: Random House, 1957.
- Litzinger, Boyd and K. L. Knickerbocker. The Browning Critics. n. p.: University of Kentucky Press, 1965.
- Lovejoy, Arthur O. "Nature as Aesthetic Norm." In his Essays in the History of Ideas. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1948, pp. 69-77.
- Lovejoy, Arthur O. "On the Discrimination of Romanticisms." In his Essays in the History of Ideas. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1948, pp. 228-253.
- McAleer, Edward C., ed. Dearest Isa: Robert Browning's Letters to Isabella Blagden. Westport: Greenwood Press, 1951.
- Maas, Jeremy. Victorian Painters. New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1969.
- Manwaring, Elizabeth. Italian Landscape in Eighteenth-Century England. 1925; rpt. New York: Russell and Russell, 1965.

- Marean, Emma E. "The Nature Element in Browning's Poetry." Boston Browning Society Papers, Selected to Represent the Work of the Society from 1886 to 1897. New York: Macmillan Company, 1897.
- Merchant, Ramona. "Pippa's Garden." Studies in Browning and His Circle, 2 (Fall 1974), 9-20.
- Miles, Josephine. Pathetic Fallacy in the Nineteenth Century: A Study of a Changing Relation Between Object and Emotion. New York: Octagon Books, 1965.
- Miller, Joseph Hillis. The Disappearance of God: Five Nineteenth-Century Writers. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1963.
- Minchin, Henry C. "Browning and Wordsworth." Fortnightly Review, 97 (May 1912), 813-824.
- Miyoshi, Masao. "Mill and 'Pauline.'" Victorian Studies, 9 (December 1965), 154-163.
- Monk, Samuel. The Sublime: A Study of Critical Theories in XIII-Century England. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1960.
- Nicolson, Marjorie Hope. Mountain Gloom and Mountain Glory: The Development of the Aesthetics of the Infinite. New York: Cornell University Press, 1959.
- Noyes, Russell. Wordsworth and the Art of Landscape. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1968.
- Oppé, A. Paul. "Art." In Early Victorian England, 1830-1865. Ed. G. M. Young. London: Oxford University Press, 1934, II, 101-170.
- Orr, Mrs. Sutherland. A Handbook to the Works of Robert Browning. London: G. Bell and Sons, 1937.
- Parr, Johnstone. "The Site and Ancient City of Browning's 'Love Among the Ruins.'" PMLA, 68 (1953), 128-137.
- Peckham, Morse. Victorian Revolutionaries: Speculations on Some Heroes of a Culture Crisis. New York: George Braziller Publishers, 1970.
- Pevsner, Nikolaus. Studies in Art, Architecture and Design: Victorian and After. London: Thames and Hudson, 1968. Vol. II.
- Pottle, Frederick A. Shelley and Browning: A Myth and Some Facts. n. p.: Archon Books, 1965.
- Price, Uvedale. On the Picturesque: With an Essay on the Origin of Taste, and Much Original Matter. Ed. Thomas Dick Lauder. Edinburgh: Caldwell, Lloyd and Company, 1842.

- Raymond, William O. "The Infinite Moment" and Other Essays in Robert Browning, 2nd ed. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1965.
- Reynolds, Myra. The Treatment of Nature in English Poetry: Between Pope and Wordsworth. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1909.
- Rosenblum, Robert, "British Painting vs Paris." Partisan Review, 24 (1957), 95-100.
- Ruskin, John. Modern Painters. Vols. III-VII of The Works of John Ruskin. eds. E. T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn. London: George Allen, 1905.
- Shelley, Percy Bysshe. "Alastor," In The Complete Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley. Eds. Roger Ingpen and Walter E. Peck. Vol. I. New York: Gordian Press, 1965.
- Smalley, Donald S., ed. Poems of Robert Browning. Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1956.
- Staley, Allen. The Pre-Raphaelite Landscape. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973.
- Stein, Richard L. "The Pre-Raphaelite Tennyson." Victorian Studies, 24 (Spring 1981), 278-301.
- Tracy, Clarence, ed. Browning's Mind and Art. New York: Barnes and Noble, 1970.
- Warren, Alba H., Jr. English Poetic Theory, 1825-1865. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1950.